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ON THE WATERFRONT:  
AN ORAL HISTORY OF RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

IRA DALE MAYS

STORIES OF A SECOND-GENERATION IRONWORKER FROM IOWA

An Interview Conducted by  
Judith K. Dunning  
in 1985

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IRA DALE MAYS

*Photograph by Judith K. Dunning, 1986*



Cataloging information

MAYS, Ira Dale (b. 1918)

Ironworker

Stories of a Second-Generation Ironworker from Iowa, 1992, 96 pp.

Family background, Waterloo, Iowa; Free Methodist Church; to Richmond, WWII; Kaiser Shipyards: schedule, supervision, pranks, women welders; ironworkers: health risks, women and minorities in trade, work on Richmond-San Rafael Bridge; postwar Richmond.

Introduction by Jim Quay, Director, California Council for the Humanities.

Interviewed 1985 by Judith K. Dunning for the Richmond Community History Series. Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.



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## INTRODUCTION by Jim Quay

It is a great pleasure to introduce "On the Waterfront" to you. I myself was introduced to the project in September 1983, shortly after becoming executive director of the California Council for the Humanities. Both the Council and its mission of bringing the humanities to out-of-school adults were relatively new to me when Judith Dunning came to my office to talk about her proposal. Ms. Dunning wanted to document an important period in the life of the Richmond, California waterfront, but she didn't want to write a study for scholars. Instead, she proposed to interview most of the oldest surviving waterfront figures, collect historic photographs of the port and its workers, and to create from these an exhibit for the public. Would the Council be interested in supporting such a project?

Happily, the two dozen scholars and citizens who sat on the Council then were interested and, convinced of the project's importance, voted to fund Ms. Dunning's proposal in early 1984. Six years later, I now know what I couldn't have known then: that "On the Waterfront" had all the features of a typical public humanities project: a powerful subject, caring scholars, a resourceful and dedicated project director, and uncertain funding.

You can appreciate why even the best public humanities project--and "On the Waterfront" is one of the best--doesn't easily attract funding. In a state focused relentlessly on the future, the next quarterly statement, the next development, the value of such a project doesn't show up in a cost-benefit analysis. Who would care about the lives of Californians past? Who would care about a waterfront whose boomtime is passed?

The answer is: thousands of people, as Judith's project proved. First and foremost, Judith, who didn't just study Richmond, but moved to and lived in Richmond. Like so many project directors, she gave time and life to this project far beyond the amount budgeted. In the language of accounting this is called "in-kind contribution"; in the language of life it's called devotion. Those of us privileged to know Judith know that the project both exhausted her and enriched her, and she has won the admiration of those who supported her and the affection of those she has interviewed and worked with.

After Judith came a handful of interested scholars--historian Chuck Wollenberg, folklorist Archie Green, and oral historian Willa Baum--who gave their time and expertise to the project. Next, a handful of people at organizations like CCH, Chevron and Mechanics Bank, who thought enough of the idea to fund it. Finally, eventually, came the thousands of visitors to Richmond Festival by the Bay during 1985-87 and saw the photographs and read the excerpts from interviews and realized that they too cared about these people. And now, you, the reader of these interviews, have an opportunity to care.

In its fifteen years of supporting efforts to bring the humanities to the out-of-school public in California, the Council has seen two great themes emerge in the projects it funds: community and diversity. "On the Waterfront" embodies both. I think such projects are compelling to us because in our busy lives, we often encounter diversity more as a threat than as a blessing, and community more as an absence than a presence.

"On the Waterfront" gives us all a chance to experience the blessings of diversity. The life details that emerge from these pictures and voices make us appreciate how much the people of the Richmond waterfront are unlike us, how much attitudes, economies, and working conditions have changed. Yet because the portraits are so personal and intimate, we can also recognize the ways in which they are like us, in their struggles, their uncertainties, their pride, and their fates. What seemed like difference becomes part of a greater sense of who "we" are.

In the lives of waterfront people, we can also glimpse how a community grew and waned. Busy with our own lives, we often neglect the activities that knit communities together. Judith Dunning's project allows us to see what we are losing and how communities are created and destroyed. And so, "On the Waterfront" fulfills the oldest promise of the humanities: that in learning about others, we learn about ourselves. For the gift of these twenty-six lives, we can thank Judith Dunning.

Jim Quay  
Executive Director  
California Council for the Humanities

March 2, 1990  
San Francisco, California

## PREFACE

### ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

"On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," began in 1985. Interviews were conducted with twenty-six Bay Area residents including early Richmond families, World War II Kaiser Shipyard workers, cannery workers, fishermen, and whalers.

I was first attracted to this shoreline industrial town located sixteen miles northeast of San Francisco in 1982 while enrolled in a documentary photography class. For ten weeks I concentrated on the Richmond waterfront, often accompanying the crew of the freighter Komoku on its nightly run from Richmond to C & H Sugar in Crockett. It was then that I began to hear colorful stories of Richmond's waterfront and the City's World War II days.

The question which captivated me in 1982 and still does is--what happened to Richmond when World War II transformed this quiet working class town into a 24-hour-day industrial giant? With the entry of the Kaiser Shipyard, the number of employed industrial workers skyrocketed from 4,000 to 100,000. An unprecedented number of women entered the work force. The shipyards set speed and production records producing one-fifth of the nation's Liberty ships. By 1945 Richmond's shipyards had launched 727 ships.

There were other enormous changes. During the wartime boom, Richmond's population rose from 23,000 to 125,000. The ethnic composition of Richmond and the entire Bay Area changed dramatically with the influx of workers recruited from the South and Midwest. There was little time to provide the needed schools and community services. Housing shortages were critical. Twenty-four thousand units of war housing were built but they were soon filled to capacity. People were living in make-shift trailer camps along the roadsides and the all-night movie theaters were filled with sleeping shipyard workers.

James Leiby, professor of Social Welfare at UC Berkeley, called Richmond a "spectacular" case of urban development. What happened to other communities over a period of decades occurred in Richmond in a few years.



Some of the questions I wanted to explore in the interviews were--who were these newcomers to Richmond and were there reasons, beyond the promise of a job, which brought them in steady streams by trains, buses, and automobiles hauling make-shift trailers? And was this destination of Richmond, California, all that they had imagined?

Other questions were just as compelling. After the war ended and Kaiser and fifty-five other industries moved out of Richmond, leaving this new population suddenly unemployed, what made people stay? And for those who left Richmond and returned home to their families in the South and Midwest, what made them come back to Richmond a second time, often bringing relatives with them?

As intrigued as I was by this new population, I also wanted to know how Richmond natives experienced these changes. In a sense, as others moved in to find new homes in Richmond, the longtime residents were losing their once small and familiar home town.

Initially, I tried to locate people who were living and working in Richmond before the World War II boom. They worked in the canneries, at the Chevron Refinery, or made their living fishing in San Pablo Bay. Most of these first interviewees were California natives, born and raised in Richmond. But the majority of the interviewees for this project came from other places--Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Iowa, Idaho, Utah--all to start a new life in California. Each one had a story to tell. Armed with a tape recorder, a camera, and lots of unanswered questions, I set out to record these local residents.

#### INTERVIEW SETTING

With few exceptions, the initial interview took place at the narrator's home. Because I was recording a diverse group, the interview setting varied dramatically. One day I might be in a neighborhood where residents, fearing stray bullets, keep their curtains drawn and their lights dimmed. Another day I would be in a home with a sweeping view of the bay, built by a former cannery owner during the Depression.

When possible, I recorded additional interviews and photographed at locations where the narrators had lived or worked. Some of these included the former Filice and Perrelli Canning Company, Ferry Point, Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor, and the last remaining World War II shipyard structures...since torn down. I also spent many days off shore. When interviewing Dominic and Tony Ghio, fishermen for over sixty years, I accompanied them on dawn fishing trips in San Pablo Bay. However, following a turbulent twelve-hour whale watching excursion to the Farallon Islands with former whaler Pratt Peterson, I vowed to continue my research on land.

When I asked some project participants to give me a personalized tour of Richmond to see what landmarks were important to them, all too often I was shown vacant lots where a family home, church, or favorite cafe once stood. The downtown, once bustling with movie theaters, dance halls, and department stores, is eerily quiet for a city of 82,000. I found that local residents are still angry over the loss of their downtown district during the 1960s redevelopment era. Longtime residents spoke emotionally of the city losing its center. Hilltop Mall, built on the outskirts of town and accessible by automobile, was no substitute for a shopping district in the middle of town. The struggle to rebuild the downtown and to attract new businesses is an ongoing one for the City of Richmond.

After the interviewing was completed, there were photo sessions in the narrator's homes and former work places, as well as meetings in which we went through family albums and trunks. Some wonderful photographs and the stories behind them were uncovered during this process. Copies are included in the individual volumes.

## PUBLIC USES OF THE ORAL HISTORIES

From the early stages of this project, both the text from the oral histories and the collection of photographs, have been used in community events. Examples include photo panels and maritime demonstrations at Richmond's Festival by the Bay, 1985, 1986, and 1987; and Oakland's Seafest '87. An exhibition, "Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers," produced in collaboration with the Richmond Museum in 1988, was developed from the oral history interviews with Dominic and Tony Ghio.



In an effort to present the oral histories to the public in a form which retained the language, the dialects, and the flavor of the original interviews, I wrote "Boomtown," a play about the transformation of Richmond during World War II. "Boomtown" was produced by San Francisco's Tale Spinners Theater and toured Bay Area senior centers, schools, and museums in 1989.

A new direction for the oral histories is in the field of adult literacy. Nearly fifty years after the recruitment of men and women from the rural South and Midwest to work in the Kaiser shipyards, some former shipyard workers and many of their descendents are enrolled in LEAP, Richmond's adult literacy program, where the students range in ages from 16 to 85 and are 70 percent black.

Our current goal is to make a shortened, large print version of the oral history transcripts for use by adult literacy students and tutors. We think that by using the true stories of local residents as literacy text, there will be an additional incentive for adults learning to read. The characters in the oral histories are often their neighbors, friends, and families speaking in their own words on such topics as the Dust Bowl, the World War II migration of defense workers, waterfront industries, family and community life.

#### THANKS

"On the Waterfront" project has had many diverse layers, including the University of California, the advisory committee, a wide range of financial supporters, and of primary importance, a large group of interviewees. I want to thank all of the project participants who donated their time, enthusiasm, and memories to this project.

Special thanks is due Jim Quay, Executive Director of the California Council for the Humanities, who has been a source of good advice and inspiration from the beginning. The Council's grant in 1984 got the project off the ground, kicking off the campaign for matching funds. Jim Quay's counsel last summer set in motion the completion of the oral histories by introducing me to the California State Library grant programs.

Bay Area historian Chuck Wollenberg and labor folklorist Archie Green have been my primary advisors, as well as mentors, from the early planning stages. Chuck provided insight into how Richmond's transition during World War II fit into the larger picture of California history. Archie Green reinforced my belief that as chroniclers of history we must continue to document the lives of working people.

From the preliminary research to the completed project, Kathleen Rupley, curator of the Richmond Museum, has been enormously supportive. Working in collaboration with Kathleen, and Museum staff Paula Hutton and Joan Connolly on the "Fishermen by Trade" exhibition was an invigorating experience as well as an excellent example of how two organizations pooled their talents and resources to create a popular community event.

Stanley Nystrom, a Museum volunteer and lifelong Richmond resident, has been a continuing resource to me. A local history buff, with a great sense of detail, he assisted me often.

Finally, I want to thank Adelia Lines and Emma Clarke of the Richmond Public Library, Sharon Pastori of the LEAP program, and Rhonda Rios Kravitz and Gary Strong of the California State Library for their support in making possible the completion of these oral history volumes and their distribution to several Bay Area public libraries which serve minority populations.

#### CLOSING THOUGHTS

In my work I am most interested in recording the stories of people who are undocumented in history and who are unlikely to leave written records behind. For me, the strength of this project has been seeing the transformation in how the interviewees view their relationship to history. They came a long way from our first contact when a typical response to my request for an interview was, "Why do you want to interview me?" or "What's important about my life?" And "Why Richmond?" With some encouragement, many became actively involved in the research and the collection of photographs, and began recommending others to be interviewed. "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," became their project, with a life of its own.

This set of oral histories is by no means the whole story of Richmond. It is one piece of its history and one effort to generate community-based literature. I hope that it will encourage others to record the stories, the songs, and the traditions of our community members. They have a lot to teach us.

Judith K. Dunning  
Project Director

September 1990  
Regional Oral History Office  
Room 486 The Bancroft Library  
University of California  
Berkeley, California



## INTERVIEW HISTORY

Ira Dale Mays

I recorded two interviews with Mr. Ira "Dale" Mays, a retired ironworker and former shipyard worker, in his Pinole home during the fall of 1985. As we talked in his kitchen, occasionally I was distracted by his hat collection which spilled over from the living room. Mr. Mays had more than fifty hats ranging from a three-foot high foam rubber cowboy hat to a favorite cap with a duck perched on top.

Mr. Mays had a lot to say about two main topics: his family's move from Iowa to Richmond during World War II, and his career as an ironworker. The chronology of his story is bumpy at times, but his overall recollection of events is clear.

Dale Mays credits his father for bringing the family to Richmond in the 1940s. His father came to California after seeing a recruitment ad for shipyard workers in an Iowa newspaper. Dale was married, with one child, and working in a butcher shop when his father sent him \$1000 to buy a car and drive it from Iowa to Richmond. His father, whom he describes affectionately as a "carny," and a real "wheeler-dealer," had a money-making plan for transporting and reselling cars.

Dale Mays came to California and stayed. Like his own son, he followed in his father's footsteps as an ironworker. His first job was a greaser in the Kaiser shipyards, and within two months, he was a certified welder. Dale Mays believes that ironworkers were the elite of the tradesmen. In his words, "As an ironworker, you were somebody. You could hold your head up high and people respected you over and above boilermakers and electricians and a lot of them. They might have more money, but the ironworker was well thought of." He described ironworkers as risktakers who are fearless. He speaks strongly about the dangers of the trade--the many accidents he has witnessed; the sixth sense and survival reflex he developed.

Dale Mays, now seventy-four years old, is an interesting and lively man. As he told me, "I just had a very, very eventful life. I've hunted, I've fished, I've traveled halfway

around the world." He is a collector with a nostalgic side--Dale Mays still has the canned goods he and his wife brought in the trailer from Iowa to Richmond nearly fifty years ago.

I want to thank Mr. Mays for his enthusiasm for this project and his patience in awaiting the completion of his volume. His is among the final six volumes in a collection of twenty from "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California." They are available at The Bancroft Library, the Richmond Public Library, and six other libraries serving the San Francisco Bay Area.

Judith K. Dunning  
Project Director

June 1992  
Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly or type. Use black ink.)

Your full name IRA DALE MAYS  
Date of birth FEB 28 1918 Birthplace WATERLOO IOWA  
Father's full name JESS ERVIN MAYS  
Occupation IRONWORKER Birthplace ILL.  
Mother's full name FLORENCE JOSEPHINE MAYS  
Occupation HOUSEWIFE Birthplace IOWA.  
Your spouse(s) VIRGINIA RUTH MAYS. Deceased.  
Your children SON TERRANCE - DAUGHTER-SUZANNE  
SON-STEPHEN.  
Where did you grow up? RICHMOND CALIF.  
When did your family first come to California? 1970?  
Reasons for coming WORK IN SHIPYARD  
Present community PINOLE CA. How long? 80 YRS.  
Education (and training programs) 11 GRADE - WELDING Subse  
Occupation(s) BUTCHER - SAILOR - IRONWORKER

continued on back page



Special interest or activities

HERCULES SENIORS-  
TARE HILLS CHURCH SAN PABLO GEM CLUB

Ideas for improving Richmond's image

What do you see for the future of Richmond?

Family Background: Waterloo, Iowa

[Interview 1: November 19, 1985] ##

Dunning: What is your full name?

Mays: My full name, as not too many people know, is Ira Dale Mays. I was born in Waterloo, Iowa, in 1918, on February 28th. If it had been one day later I would only be about eight years old now. We come from a family farm. We lived on a farm and a city both, in my younger days. I enjoyed Iowa very much.

Dunning: How about your parents. Where were they born?

Mays: My dad was born in Missouri and my mother was born in Iowa. My mother was Norwegian and English, and my father was Irish, German, and Indian.

Dunning: That's quite a combination.

Mays: Yes. I don't know what you would call me.

Dunning: Did you know your grandparents at all?

Mays: Oh, yes. I knew my grandmother on my mother's side. She's the only one I knew. The others, they were all deceased by the time I got up, but I knew my grandmother. She belonged to the Salvation Army, I remember. She was a big woman, but beautiful. She

would walk about two hundred feet and then always stop and look in back of her. I don't know ever why, but she couldn't walk over two hundred feet without stopping and looking behind her. I don't know what she thought was chasing her.

Dunning: Do you know what brought your family to Iowa, how they happened to settle there?

Mays: No. It might have been the John Deere Tractor Company.

They make the John Deere there, and my dad was quite a machinist. I think that that was what pulled them in there, yes.

Dunning: Was that what your father did for a living? He worked as a machinist?

Mays: Yes, a machinist. And then he went into construction before he came to California.

#### Description of Father

Dunning: Could you tell me a little about your father, what he was like?

Mays: I always admired my father. After he left Iowa and came out here he joined local 378 of the Structural Ironworkers in Oakland, and he went to work in the shipyards. He was a maintenance man on the big rigs



that serviced the ships on each one of the ways there. He maintained the cables and the shivs and all the lifting mechanisms.

My father came out here during the shipyard days and lived in the war housing. He's the one that suggested that I come out. I was a butcher for Rath Packing Company in Waterloo Iowa, and I was getting the big sum of eighty-eight cents an hour. That was top butcher, eighty-eight cents. I started out at eleven cents but I worked myself up to eighty-eight.

My father sent me money then. He sent me \$1,000, and I bought a car. He said if I would buy a car and we would bring it out to California, we would resell it. He was a conniver. He would buy and sell cars on the weekends.

So I bought a car and I took my wife and my son. I took a leave of absence and I came to California. My father got me a job in his line of work, as a structural ironworker. I went to maintaining rigs, too. I went to work for \$1.20 an hour.

Dunning: That was quite a raise.

Mays: That was quite a raise. I got drafted while I was in Richmond. They weren't drafting the shipyard employees, but they got down pretty low, and so I was out trying to enlist. I had four brothers and a sister who were in the service, so I wanted to be in too, but they wouldn't take me as a volunteer. Finally they drafted me. I went in the navy about two years before the Japanese surrendered.

Dunning: I would like to go into more depth about the decision of your family coming to Richmond. Before that, I would like to get more of an idea about your hometown in Iowa. Could you describe it for me?

Mays: Well, Waterloo, Iowa, I think, is a typical American town. We had a river that ran right through the middle of town which was our main source of activities, from boating, swimming, to excellent fishing, and ice skating in the winter. It seemed like that river just drew us all the time.

Waterloo had sixty thousand people. We had an east side and a west side, and the west side was the rich people and the east side was the poor people, or the lower: not so wealthy. I lived on the east side. We had rivalry all the time between East Waterloo High and West Waterloo High as far as football. I played football with East Waterloo. We didn't win the year I played.

It was a nice little town. We had John Deere Tractor Company and Rath Packing Company, which were our big employers there. I think it was just a wonderful place for a kid to grow up.

Dunning: How many children in your family?

Mays: There were seven children. And I only have one deceased right now. There was five boys and two girls. It didn't seem like much, nine people at that time. When nine people get around the table, it didn't seem like it was very many of us.

Dunning: Where did you fit in in that group of seven children?

Mays: I was the eldest. I'm the oldest of the nine. We still are very clannish. We have a family reunion twice a year. We have one sister that we lost to cancer, and my mother and father are gone, but I have the brothers and one sister left.

Dunning: Where are they living?

Mays: They are all in the Bay Area. They all were in the service. One brother is married to a Japanese girl, and two of us brothers married sisters. I have one brother that's a judge in Redding, California, and two that are ironworkers, and one who works for Contra Costa County. They all fared out pretty good. They all have nice homes and I'm proud of them.

I have three children. I have two sons and a daughter. My one son, he followed as an ironworker. He's in the ironworkers and he's a foreman for them. I have one son who's at PG&E. He's the highest paid man in PG&E in the field. He's an atomic engineer. He's doing good. And I have a daughter. She works for a little company over in Benicia. They're all doing good, and I praise the Lord for that.

Description of Mother

Dunning: Could you describe a typical day for your mother when all the children were living at home, when she had the seven ones, things that you remember her doing the most?

Mays: Well, I'll tell you, even as a machinist my father didn't make oodles of money. It took a lot of money with as many as we had. Of course, the house was heated with just round oak stoves in the middle of the room, I remember. That usually was my job--and it still is--you see, I still have a stove--to build fires.

My mother was quite a seamstress. She had to be to keep that many kids clothed. I remember she would go to the shirt factory and get boxes of shirt scraps from the shirt company there, Hanson. They made shirts. She would get the scraps and she would make our underwear, our shirts, our shorts, our gloves. She could make everything.

She was terrific with a sewing machine. And it wasn't an electric one either. I remember she used to have an old pedal machine, but she could make that thing sing. She was a beautiful woman. She was a large woman.

Dunning: What was her name?

Mays: Her name was Florence Josephine Dunn Mays. I was born to her when she was seventeen years old. I think they



did that more then. I was the first one, and I think my mother was seventeen when I was born. She was a terrific mama. I'm telling you, if a kid was in the hospital, there was no getting her out of the hospital until that baby came home with her. I've seen her stay at the hospital day and night. We didn't have too much sickness, but when there was, she was right there. She was a wonderful Christian woman.

Dunning: Do you consider that there are certain things that she tried to hand down to the children of the family?

Mays: Well, I think that we all had our jobs. Nobody was a prima donna. She made us all work. I've done a lot of dishes and I've done a lot of baby-sitting. She had about five sisters in the Waterloo area, and we didn't have two cars. A lot of times we didn't have one. Those sisters used to get together a lot, and then I would have to baby-sit, being the oldest. I would stay home and watch the kids and she would go visit with her sisters. It happened about once a month. I can remember her instructing me on what not to do and what to do.

Of course, she was out of sight and we would start making candy, though. That was our big thing, making candy. If we burned anything we put pans in the rain barrel. But when that rain barrel went empty we got caught. Instead of cleaning our dishes we would hide them. The rain barrel was always a good place.

Mama sent us to Sunday school, and in the latter years she went with us. I remember she made sure that we were well grounded on the things of the Lord.

### Free Methodist Church

Dunning: Could you talk about that? What particular church did you attend?

Mays: I remember the church very vividly. It was a Free Methodist Church where she sent us. The Sunday school teacher was my mailman. What a wonderful guy he was. There was no music in the church. I never understood that. In the church back home, all they used was a pitch pipe; no piano and no music at all. There was something about it.

### Songs of the Blood

Dunning: Was that a rule of the church?

Mays: I think in that Methodist denomination it was. There was no music. There was beautiful singing, but when they started singing, why, "beep," they would blow a pitch pipe.

They sang songs of the blood. That's a good way I know of how you can judge a lot of churches; do they sing of the blood?

Dunning: Could you tell me more about that? Songs of the blood is a term I'm not real familiar with.

Mays: Is there power in the blood? A lot of denominations deny the blood, that Christ even shed his blood for us. So they delete any blood. It's obnoxious to some people to bring blood into Christianity. But without the shedding of blood there's no forgiveness, so it is very important. I've been in churches where you look through the hymn book and you won't find a blood song, like, "There's Power in the Blood."

Dunning: That was a good explanation. Was the Free Methodist Church a popular church in your community?

Mays: Oh, yes. All the kids in the neighborhood went there. And they had daily vacation bible school, I remember. I won the throwing contest one year. If you went for two weeks straight during the summer you got to go to the picnic. If you didn't go every day you wouldn't get to go to the picnic. That was our reward for going to daily vacation bible school. We would go every morning for two weeks and then we would have a great big picnic out to the park.

There was swimming and throwing contests and sacks contest. I guess I had so much fun at those picnics I just picked up on it. I go to the Tara Hills Alliance Church here in San Pablo. I am the renegade. I usually run the games with the kids.

I get along very good with kids. I've got all the equipment. I've got tug-of-war, I've got sack races. I've got all the games for a complete picnic, and I lend them out quite often to different organizations. They call me up every once in a while to come and put the picnic on. I put it on for the ironworkers, too. The ironworkers have a picnic and I usually run the kid games out there, and the adults. We have egg throwing contests. You give them a real egg and see who can throw the farthest. I have a whole list of games there.

Dunning: So that's something that really started in your childhood with the church picnics.

Mays: Yes, I think so as I think about it now. I had such a good time doing it, and memories of it. I just wanted my kids to have it, and the other ones too. Directly I never thought of it that way, but I believe that was where it started, way back there, from the picnics we had back there and the enjoyment.

#### Rules of the Church

Dunning: Of the Methodist Church that you were involved in, were there certain prohibitions that the church enforced?

Mays: Oh, definitely. They were anti-everything, I guess, as far as today. They didn't have music in the



church, and ladies didn't wear make-up, and they didn't wear jewelry, and they wore long dresses. There was no pants. You never saw no pants at all at that time.

But it was a very loving church. They really cared. They cared for you and took a lot of interest in you. They had some very well-grounded, beautiful, Christian people for teachers. They were firm. I mean, you didn't get away with disrupting a class or anything. As I remember back, the teacher was beautiful, and the pastor too.

Dunning: Did you continue with that church right through your adolescence?

Mays: No. I went there until I was about twelve, thirteen years old. Then, of course, I was too big for that. I strayed a little bit. But the scripture says, "Raise up a child in the way he should go, and when he's old, he'll not depart." Those kind of people that have that grounding, they'll come back. I did. I didn't get back until I was about maybe thirty-four, thirty-five years old. But I always had a head knowledge of what was right and wrong. I didn't always do it, but...

Dunning: How about your brothers and sisters?

Mays: They all went to the church. Three of my brothers are in the Lord's work as far as laymen. My one brother went to Guatemala and built a church down there for free. He went down there and never got any wages or nothing. He just went down there and worked on that

church. He owns a Red Carpet Realty in Redding, so it was really a sacrifice for him to go. He spent six weeks down there building a church for them.

My other brother, the judge, he's the head honcho in the church in Lakehead. I'm the elder in our church here at Tara Hills Alliance.

#### Tara Hills Alliance Church

Dunning: How does the Tara Hills Alliance Church in San Pablo differ from the Methodist Church where you grew up?

Mays: Well, we have music for one thing. They have music, and they are more liberal. But if it's scriptural, they go by the book. That's what I say. They go by the book.

Dunning: Go by the bible?

Mays: Yes. They go by the book. The Free Methodist Church did, too, but it was just like Seventh Day Adventists. They want you to go to church on Saturday, that's all right. That doesn't make that much difference. There's a lot of little things like that that sure won't keep you out of Heaven, but as their interpretation of it goes, the seventh day is Saturday, which is probably right. If you look at the calendar, the first day is Sunday and the seventh day is Saturday. They could be right, but according to

the New Testament they come together on the first day of the week.

I think Sunday is right, but I don't make a big issue out of it. Just like drinking wine. I don't drink it myself, and we don't condone it at the church, but I know a lot of people in the church that do do it, not to excess. But in the Methodist it was absolute. Here I think they will accept, not a drunkard, but somebody that drinks wine with a meal. But I can live without it, and I have since I've come back to the Lord. I don't mess with it at all.

As a matter of fact, I'm about with drinking like I am with communists. Communism, I wouldn't want to learn nothing about it; there might be something about it I like. So I just stay away from it altogether. There absolutely must be something intriguing about it to get as many people involved, so the best thing is not to even involve yourself, and then you don't know.

Dunning: That's one way of handling it. .

Mays: Yes. Just don't take care of everything.

#### Family Life in Iowa

Dunning: Going back a bit to Waterloo, did your mother ever work outside the family home?

Mays: No. With seven kids? No. Mama never worked out. I know she made clothes for some people. She made shirts and blouses and things for different families. I think most of the time she gave them away. If anybody needed anything, all they would have to do is ask. A lot of them called her Flo, and Florence. I know she made layettes for every baby that was born in our family. She was there.

Most of us children--out of the seven I think two were born in a hospital. I remember being the oldest. When they were born them women used to have to stay in bed for ten days flat on their back. Mama, we'd go in and see her and wait on her.

Dunning: Did the children have to take over most of the family responsibilities?

Mays: Well, the other sisters would come in. She had four sisters and two brothers, and they would come in and take over. But I remember she laid flat on her back for ten days. Now they don't even lay them down.

Dunning: Did she have a midwife?

Mays: Oh, yes. They usually had midwives. I don't know if some of them even had doctors. The midwives would fill out birth certificates and everything. They were great on midwives back there because it was less expensive and they were handy to get.

Dunning: I know things were different then, but I just wondered, were you ever present at any of your mother's births?



Mays: No. They wouldn't let us in there. But we had pretty good knowledge from our farm life and everything of what was going on. That's one thing about a kid on a farm, he has a pretty good knowledge; and I think that's good, to know the birds and the bees and all that. He got a pretty good knowledge. You don't throw no deals at him that would--

Dunning: Stork coming down, or the cabbage patch?

Mays: Yes. They don't buy that there stork bit or anything like that, or do this or you'll get pimples or something.

I lost one brother. By the time that they got him to Iowa City, I guess it was too late. His esophagus wasn't complete to his stomach. I guess the baby couldn't get any food in his stomach, and the little guy died. I don't know whether he starved to death, or whether he died on the operating table. But I know I had one little brother that died.

My dad made the marker for him. I remember that. He made a little lamb. He made a mold and made a little lamb and went out there and made his marker. My dad was really handy. He made bird baths, and he made our cement steps. He was good with cement. He would make a lot of things for people.

Dunning: You mentioned that you father was a machinist, but was he also a farmer?

Mays: Yes. We had just a small farm with gardening and cows and chickens. We had at most about five or six acres.

Dunning: Did the other children in the family have household chores?

Mays: Oh, yes. We all had something to do. The dishes, and we had to pump water. We didn't have electricity. On wash days we had a machine that you had to take the old water out of, and heat water on the stove and then put the water in the wood machine. You put the clothes in, and then you had a foot pedal and a handle and you had to synchronize that foot pedal with the handle and you could make that machine go. It was quite a deal.

When you got done washing a lot of time they would boil the clothes, too. You had to pump all this water and boil clothes in the tub on the stove. Then, when you got all done, you had to dump the water out of the wood machine. It had to drain and then you had to refill it so it didn't shrink and it would be ready for the next time. Wash day was a dread day when I was a kid.

Dunning: Life was certainly more complicated.

Mays: We had a milk separating machine, too. I think of that. I saw a milk separator the other day down at some antique store and it had a bird dog on it. You put your milk in there and it separates the milk from the cream, and then you take the cream to town and sell it, of course.

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Mays: With that milk separator, if you didn't go the right speed, a bell would start ringing and I would get yelled at. You had to keep it going. If you slowed down it would go, "Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding." Mother would yell, "Dale!" You had to keep on going.

Yes, there was lots of things for the kids to do: bring in wood, cut wood, chop wood, and when we had the little ranch it was eggs, and milk, and feeding the animals. It was an excellent way for a kid to grow up.

Dunning: It sounds like the chores weren't just girl chores and boy chores.

Mays: That's right, yes. Everybody pitched in and worked together. I know this one brother of mine, when he knew Mother was going to visit her sisters he would premeditate the situation and he would get lost, even if it was his turn to baby-sit. I've got one brother that's thirteen months younger than I. That's the judge. He'd split. When it came time for Mother to go, he would be gone. I guess I wasn't that bright. I would get caught. We still laugh about that.

### Education

Dunning: What schools did you go to?

Mays: We had nice schools. I went to McKinley School. We were talking about that just the other day. It was pretty good schooling there. We didn't have segregation, but it was segregated. They had the black schools and the white schools.

Dunning: Was there a very large black population in your town?

Mays: North Waterloo was predominantly black. They all stayed right out there, that was one thing. A lot of them worked in the packing house. There was a lot of segregation there then.

Dunning: Did you ever have any connection with the black community at the packing house?

Mays: Well, I worked at the packing house as a butcher, and then I came into contact. I remember this one fellows name was Percy Burt. Percy. He was a preacher. I think he would probably be like your holy roller, I guess we called them then. He had some popular singers.

I went to the church one time. He invited me out, and I went out there. Boy, I mean they have a time. They really keep time with the music and clap and sing along with them. They have a good time. It was a holy roller type.

And I hunted with him. I went jackrabbit hunting with him, and squirrel hunting. With that preacher I had quite a rapport. He worked up to be a butcher too. He worked on the table with me. We had a lot of nice conversations. I guess maybe I got some ideas



from him, too. He was a very wonderful, beautiful, Christian man.

Dunning: How many years did you attend school?

Mays: I didn't graduate. I went to the tenth grade and then I went to work in the packing house. I worked during the summer, and then when school opened I just didn't go back.

Dunning: Whose decision was it to leave school or to start working?

Mays: My parents didn't want me to. Mother didn't want me to quit school. I guess it was mine.

Dunning: Did your parents want you to follow a certain occupation?

Mays: Well, my dad, when he came here he was an ironworker, and that's the one who gave me \$1,000 to drive a car out there for him. He said, "You buy a car for me and drive it out here."

So I did that there, and then when I got out here he got me right in the ironworkers. So, yes. And now my son is an ironworker.

Dunning: Three generations of ironworkers.

Mays: Yes, we're all ironworkers. I'm a retired ironworker now. That was the best thing I ever did. I've got a real nice retirement, and I've got a Kaiser Health Plan. So it's the greatest thing.

My wife just passed away a year ago, and she was on the Kaiser Plan there. She died of cancer. I'll bet you my bill would have been \$50,000 on that girl, and Kaiser picked up every bit of it. That's another great thing. I'm really out stomping for Kaiser. I lost her, but there wasn't nobody that could have done any more than they did. They really are a beautiful organization. Now I found out that Kaiser is going to give us--I have heart trouble--heart transplants now.

Dunning: I just saw that in the paper last week.

Mays: Yes. I have a little irregular heartbeat. They said that it's pretty common among people. But I'll be sixty-eight years old in February, so--and I go pretty good. I've been pheasant hunting twice this last week. I work out three times a week, and I go swimming twice a week.

Dunning: You do your best to keep fit.

Mays: Yes. I've lost about thirty-five pounds since my wife died. I was eating junk food a lot.

Move to Richmond, California, 1940s

Dunning: I would like to hear about your father coming to Richmond. Was he the first person in your family to come? And do you know the circumstances? What brought him here?

Mays: Kaiser Shipyards advertised in the local paper back in Waterloo for machinists and ironworkers. Things were quite slow back there so Dad just took off and came out here.

Dunning: He came by himself?

Mays: Yes, my father came all by himself. He was out here alone not very long. I was married when he came out here. I had a wife and one son then. He worked a little while and made enough money and he sent and got Mother a house and told her to come on out. I think there was about four kids at home then, so the four kids and Mother got on the train and came on out here. They moved right into Housing Authority apartments.

About a year later he told me the cars were selling good, and if I could buy a nice clean car, he would send me \$1,000 and I would drive it out there and he would resell it. I think he resold it for about \$1,500, so it was a good deal. That's what he did.

He was a sly old dog. He would advertise something in the paper which a lot of times he didn't even have--just to get the people to come. He would advertise something that was popular and he didn't even have it. When they got there he would say, "Oh, you missed it. But I got this." He was an old carnival man. He was quite a character.

Instead of going to the machine works, somehow he got hooked up with the ironworkers and he went into

ironworks, and then when I got out here he got me right in.

Dunning: You got right in, but this was at the shipyard?

Mays: Yes, as a maintenance man. Then my wife, I got her in Kaiser as an IBM operator. She worked the IBM machine. She was of German descent. She spoke a lot of German. She had been to Germany twice, and boy, they were investigating her all the time. They investigated her three or four different times to see if she had any connection with Germany during the war. This was during World War II.

Dunning: How did she handle that interrogation?

Mays: Good. She never had any connection. I knew it was the FBI that would check her at the shipyard. They watched a lot of her moves and her friends to see if there was any connection.

Dunning: Was it because she had a strong accent? She didn't have have a German name.

Mays: No, she had Mays, but her maiden name was German. Both her folks were born in Germany. They spoke German at the house. I had to learn it in self defense.



Drafted into the Navy

Dunning: You mentioned earlier that you were drafted when you were working at the shipyard.

Mays: Yes, I got drafted during the war. I tried to enlist and they wouldn't take me, and then, by golly, they up and drafted me, my draft board in Iowa got so short.

The only ones that they were letting go were kids in school. If you were in school or if you were a preacher. If you were a preacher you could get out of it, or if you were in school. I didn't qualify either way, and I only had the one boy. I was about twenty-six years old, so I got drafted.

I had to go back to Iowa and report to my board. I took my wife back on a train and she was pregnant. I couldn't get a double berth. I got her a berth, and I sat in the smoker, just in the men's bathroom, for three days and two nights. I played poker with the bellhops and the guys. You know, I made enough money to pay for the trip? But I couldn't get in with her. We had the one boy and her.

Dunning: Did she stay in Iowa the whole time when you were in the service?

Mays: No. She stayed there with her mother until the baby was born. A little girl was born. Then when I got stationed out here--at Camp Shoemaker--why, she came out. Her and her two kids came out. I got them into Housing Authority again.



Dunning: So they came out to Shoemaker or to Richmond?

Mays: They came to Richmond. My folks were in Richmond, too. I had a car, and I would commute back and forth from Shoemaker to there. I pulled a few strings, of course.

Dunning: I was going to say, how could she get back into Housing Authority if you weren't working in the shipyard?

Mays: You didn't have to work for the shipyard to get in there. My sister-in-law was in the Housing Authority, so that helped too. She got in. That was no problem. We got right back in. As a matter of fact, I was over at the officer's snack bar over there and I used to take her out on Saturdays and Sundays and she would work for me. She would be my cashier.

We had it going and coming. I had a port and a starboard liberty card. One night they would let the port go. If you didn't have a port card you couldn't get off the base. The next night the starboard would go. You would have starboard. But I had one of each so I had it made. I could come and go just about as I pleased.

You could buy gas right there cheaper on the base than anyplace. I took a few groceries. Then I had my wife working for me. So I didn't have it too bad.

Images of California

Dunning: Before you moved to California for the first time, did you have any preconceived notions of what California was going to be like?

Mays: You know, I told my wife when I got married that some day we would go to California. That was one of our goals. She knew I was a dreamer. I told her that I would take her to California. I didn't know how.

We built a home. I built a house, a lovely home back in Iowa, before I came out here. But then after I got out of the navy and the war was over we went back and sold the house and came back to California.

But even as a kid I know we tried to imitate movie stars, and I always thought of Hollywood and Vine. Yes, that was one of my fantasies, living in California, and I've never regretted it. I'm a bear hunter. I have been in on about fifty bears. I deer hunt. I've had coon dogs. I've got two dogs yet. Anything you want to do is in California. I've got two boats. I've had an airplane. Anything you want to do in California you can do it. Like maybe this weekend I'm going to snow country.

Dunning: Are you a skier?

Mays: No. I go up to the snow and play a while, and then run over to Reno and back.

Dunning: Gamble a little bit?

Mays: Well, yes. We gamble a little bit. I'm not no heavy gambler. I go a lot with the senior citizens on the bus.

Dunning: That's good.

Mays: Yes. Then I don't have to drive. And it's cheaper. You can practically go for nothing. That's one thing about being a senior citizen, you don't have spare times. You can look around and find something to do all the time, eight and a half hours in the day.

Dunning: Did your father ever write letters home telling the family how it was for him to come out here?

Mays: Yes, I guess he liked it. He liked what he saw. Most of the working people in the Midwest--you can put this down--they work all summer to keep warm in the winter, as high as coal is, and petroleum, and oil, and all that. You've got to save your money to buy clothes, and coal, and insulate your house for the winter.

Well, here you don't have that problem. It's not a big problem to heat during the winter. But back there everything you made during the summer would go into buying coal, and wood, and keeping the house warm during the winter. I remember I've come home from school when it was twenty-eight below zero. The last period was swimming, and my head would be froze right through when I got home.

It's good to have seasons, but you've got seasons here. You only have to get in the car and go a few miles, that's the only thing. This area right where I'm sitting is, I think, the best place in the world.

Dunning: In Pinole?

Mays: Pinole. I mean, we don't get too hot, don't get too cold. I can heat this house on electricity. I've been going about \$28 dollars a month.

Dunning: Do you think when your father left for Richmond he felt like it was going to be a permanent move?

Mays: I think probably he wanted it to be. I think it was the best decision that he ever made. He answered an ad in the paper. I think he wanted it to last. He liked what he saw. He was a very brilliant man, I tell you.

He was always taking advantage of any situation. I know he bought a house in San Pablo, and it was more or less a shack. But he bought the house for a little bit of nothing. Some guy from Oklahoma didn't like it here and he wanted to go back, so my father bought it. He bought that house and fixed it up, painted it, and fixed the yard a little bit, and he sold it. I think he sold it three times. People would buy that thing and move out and not even tell him they were going. He would go out there and find the house empty.

A lot of people didn't like it here. A lot of Oklahomans and Arkansans, they would come out here and it just wasn't their cup of tea. They couldn't get in



the housing, and he would sell them that house, get a down payment, start getting monthly payments on it. He would go out there and they would be gone.

Dunning: It seems like he came out earlier than the real huge influx of people. Was he able to get housing right away when he came here?

Mays: Yes, I think he did. I think he was one of the first ones. The corner of Tenth and Virginia is where they lived. The sister of Pretty Boy Floyd lived upstairs. I'll never forget that. Remember the gangster they shot and killed back in Oklahoma or someplace, Pretty Boy Floyd?

Dunning: I wonder if she's still alive?

Mays: I wouldn't doubt it, yes. His sister lived upstairs. Pretty Boy Floyd. I don't remember their last name now. I guess it was Floyd.

There were a lot of characters. I remember they had a bowling alley down on Cutting then, and a beer joint, a beer parlor. We used to go down there. He started right out bowling down there. He hadn't bowled half a game until he got the idea, and he was bowling 200 games right off the bat. He was very articulate. He was quite a guy. My dad was a very good hunter and shooter, too. He was a wonderful shot.



World War II Experiences

Mays: The other thing I remember about the early days in Richmond when I came out here, we used to see lines. You wouldn't even ask what it was, you just go get in line. You knew there was something. It was going to either be butter or cigarettes, or maybe white shirts. Those were pretty big things then. Butter, white shirts, and cigarettes.

Dunning: These would be for sale?

Mays: Yes, they would be for sale. Somebody would get a commodity and they would form a line, and you would get up there and see what you were going to get. A lot of people stood in this line and didn't know what it was, but you just go get in line. Pretty near everything was get in line here during the early days. When Kaiser was going good with about five shipyards, everything was a line. If you wanted to go to the movie you had to get in line. Everything was a line.

But I remember we would just go get in line. Ask the guy ahead, "What do you think they're giving?"

"I don't know."

Dunning: But they wanted it.

Mays: Yes. You could always peddle your cigarettes. Whatever the price was, you could double your money by bootlegging them.

Social Life

Dunning: Who did you make friends with when you came?

Mays: I think we made friends more or less in our own union, with the guys you worked with. Ironworkers are pretty clannish. We met some ironworker friends, and then of course, I had four brothers here and a mother and father. I remember we used to go over to her house. She had a television set.

Dunning: Your mother's house?

Mays: Yes, there on Tenth and Virginia. We would go over there, and I think it was Monday night, and Milton Berle was on. I tell you, there would be as high as eighteen and twenty of us sitting on the floor watching Milton Berle. Isn't that something? It just flashed back to me. He would come out in those dumb outfits, dressed like a woman, and we just sat around watching.

And it was just a small set. I think it was only a ten inch set. But you couldn't hardly get through the house for people sitting on the floor and davenports and all over to watch Milton Berle. We would always come together. I had a family. I had a built-in family when I came here, so I didn't have to worry about that.

Dunning: When did your brothers come out here?

Mays: My brother Truman was in the CBs, and he went in before they came out. Irving, he was the seventh man at Dunkirk, the seventh man off the ship. He's got a steel plate in his leg. He was the seventh man at the invasion of Dunkirk. Donny was in the merchant marines. And a sister, Elaine, was in the air force. She's the one that died. Then my other brother, Robert, was in the army. So we had a mixture. And then I was navy. We had a cross section.

Truman, I'll never forget. He was in the CBs, and he was stationed in Alaska. He was getting discharged, and he came to Shoemaker, California. I wound up in Shoemaker. I ran the ship's service there for officers in the last part of my service there. I was in charge of the officer's mess.

This one day I was going through the regular mess, and I looked over one line from me and saw my brother, that I hadn't seen in about two or three years, standing there. So I broke my line and went over and got behind him. I stayed there for a long time and finally bumped him a couple of times. He turned around, and we had quite a reunion right there, boy.

It was per chance to see your brother after three years on a navy base. Right then there was probably twenty thousand men out there. We had a hallelujah time there for a while.

Dunning: Just your own family increased the population of Richmond.

Mays: Yes. At that last family reunion there was sixty-seven of us there. Sixty-seven.

Dunning: All living in the Bay Area?

Mays: Yes, pretty much. But a lot of them knew it would probably be my wife's last reunion, so I think they came out of the woodwork, in-laws and out-laws and everybody, to attend that. Usually there's forty to fifty at our reunions, but this one there was sixty-seven of us that showed up. They had monitored television of the baseball field and the swimming pool. It was held out in Benicia. My one brother has got a big house down there. So my wife had two televisions she could watch. She stayed in the house. But they came out.

Dunning: Do you have any family left in Iowa, or did some of your brothers go back and stay there?

Mays: No. I've got some relations there, cousins, but as far as the immediate family I go back there and it's not the same anymore.

I've got a lot of cousins. We used to have a reunion back there. We had it in a park, and they came in cattle trucks. They cleaned out a cattle truck and came from the different towns around there, the different relations from the farms. There would be a hundred and fifty of us at those reunions. They put on skits and floor shows and had clowns. It was quite a time.



That was another thing about picnics and reunions. I think that's another reason why we've kept it up ever since mother and dad died. We have a reunion at least once a year to get together. A lot of people call us clannish, but that's all right.

Dunning: Well, it's a good family tradition.

Mays: Oh, yes. I call my brother in Redding, or he calls me, every other week. I can show you my bill. It costs me a couple dollars a week to call him, but we keep very close contact. They are concerned about me, too.

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#### First Impressions of Richmond

Dunning: Could you tell me your very first impression coming from Iowa to Richmond, what it was like to you?

Mays: I guess it just about met up with some of my fantasies. From Tenth Street there you can see the shipyards, or where we lived. The hustle and the bustle, it was just about what I had dreamed it had looked like. And I like it. You know, the thing that impressed me--I can't even name the flowers. Maybe you can help me. Back home we buy them in pots and take them to the cemetery every year.



Anyway, out here they grow on bushes. I couldn't get over it. Even in the Housing Authority, my dad had a garden out in front. How things grow out here, and how you could find lemon trees, and orange trees all over, and the weather being so nice. And the ocean. I remember the first time I saw ocean. This was right here. And the Golden Gate Bridge. Yes, I was thoroughly impressed. I was just here a little while and they made a ship and launched it.

Dunning: That was the Robert E. Peary in four days?

Mays: Yes, four days. I was here then. It was just a little while after I got here.

Then during the noon hours there in the shipyards you could go down to the loading platform, and they would put on a floor show every day. I saw a lot of movie stars and band leaders and very important people that used to come and entertain us, try to sell us bonds, you know.

Dunning: Any that stand out in your mind?

Mays: Let's see. I think Bob Hope was there once. I remember him. It escapes me now, some of the other ones. There was singing groups. They sang, "The Boy From Company B."

Dunning: Do you ever remember hearing the Singing Shipbuilders? They were a gospel quartet.

Mays: It seems like I heard something like that.

Dunning: I interviewed one of the men, Lewis Van Hook. He's in his eighties, and the rest of the quartet is still alive. They would sing during the noon hour.

Mays: Yes, they would come there. Of course, there was five shipyards, and I worked in shipyard two. They would go from one to the other, so every day they would have different ones in different places. We were entertained by them. We would sit back, maybe sitting on a truckbed or something, and listen while we ate our lunch. That was a nice feature.

Then they would try to sell you bonds. The wife and I bought quite a few of them. It was \$25 denominations. When the war was over we didn't have our house paid for. Well, we went back and we paid for our house with bonds. It cost me \$5,000 to build the house, so we must have had a couple thousand dollars in \$25 bonds that we had taken out of our check every week.

Dunning: Where was the first place that you and your wife lived?

Mays: Of course it was with the folks for a while when we got here. We had to stay with them.

Dunning: Do you think that really helped ease your transition, having some family here?

Mays: Oh, yes. I probably wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't have struck out on my own. I'm not that courageous. But knowing that I had a place to sleep and a car to drive out here--

Pulling a Trailer to California

Dunning: Did your wife and baby come with you? Did you all come together?

Mays: Yes. We all came. I pulled a trailer. Do you know what? I still have some of the fruit out here on the shelf. That there must have been forty years ago. It's probably 1940. Yes, forty-five years ago, and I still have some of the fruit on the shelf. I can show it to you. I was looking at it the other day. I want to dump it.

But we brought a trailer. I made a trailer and we pulled a trailer. I had boxes of fruits and vegetables in there. We had a little ranchette and we raised a garden and we canned everything. My wife didn't want to leave it so I hauled that there all the way to California and I still have it. I should have dumped it forty-five years ago. But I have shelf after shelf of the stuff.

We were pretty sure that we were going to stay-- I knew I could get a job, and I knew I wanted to be in California from what I had read and seen about it.

Dunning: How soon after you arrived did you get a job?

Mays: Probably three days. My dad, he had ways of getting things done. He took me right down to the shipyard.



It wasn't hard to get a job. Everybody was looking for men. They were advertising in all papers all the way around the United States. They would pay your way out here if you would come. As a matter of fact, I think my dad did get his way paid out here as long as he had a craft.

But we paid our own way out here. Then we put in for Housing Authority. I had a sister-in-law that worked for the Housing Authority, that's another thing. Vera, the wife of my brother that was in the CBs, she came out here, too, then, after dad was out here. She worked for the Housing Authority. So it wasn't very long until we got a nice two-bedroom apartment. It's torn down now.

Dunning: Do you remember what was it called? I know there was Harbor Gate, and--

Mays: We were close to the shipyard. I know I used to take my son. When both of us worked I carried him on my shoulder to the nursery every day.. Kaiser provided a nursery for us. I would take him over there every day and leave and pick him up on my way home from work every night.

We were in the Hoffman Boulevard area. It was a nice apartment. We had an upstairs apartment for a while, and you had iceboxes instead of refrigerators. If you forgot, the icepan would run over. Underneath the icebox is a pan, and if you didn't dump that thing it would run over. But if you could get a ground floor you could take it and drill a hole through the floor and run a tube through it and run it right out

in the ground. So we were tickled when I didn't have to dump that dumb icepan all the time. Yes, the iceman would come by every day and sell you ice. It was always nice to have a bottom apartment.

Dunning: Do you remember the cost of your housing unit, what they would charge you every month?

Mays: No, but I know it was really reasonable. It was really, really reasonable. I was getting \$1.20 an hour and I worked quite a bit of overtime. I worked Saturdays and Sundays seven days a week because a lot of guys wouldn't do it. They wouldn't work the overtime, but I wanted to make enough to pay that house off back in Iowa, so I would sign up. You signed up in your craft. They worked seven days a week but you didn't have to. But if you signed up you could work seven days.

Dunning: So mostly you worked seven days a week?

Mays: Yes.

#### Schedule in the Shipyards

Dunning: Could you give me an idea of your typical schedule, when you would start, and which shift you worked?

Mays: Mostly, on maintenance you worked the day shift. We got called in sometimes for emergencies to put new cables on or put one of those big whirlies back on the



track. We called them Washington whirlies. It had jumped the track.

Dunning: What is a Washington whirly?

Mays: That was a big rig that went down in between the ways that serviced the boats. They were big cranes. The cranes could reach over on two sides, work two boats, and they would go up and down that way. They were electric and they would go down there and they would service those two ways. They would put the material in place and put supplies on the docks. It was about fifty feet to where the operator was, and then the boom would be maybe another ninety feet. So they could reach right over, right in the middle of the ship, all over the ship on both sides.

There was one. Now, there in shipyard two, they had about twelve ways, so they might have fourteen rigs. It comes to mind, I had twenty-eight rigs that I had to service. I was an oiler for a long time. I just carried a grease gun and an oil can and I oiled all the shivs and everything on the booms. They would flatten them out and there was a walkway. You could walk right out there, and I would maintain the rigs. I would have to get them there. About every two days I would have to oil them. That was my job.

Dunning: What time in the morning did you start?

Mays: I think we started right around seven. We put in eight hour shifts. Seven to four-thirty. Then we had a long lunch break. They had a lot of men. I tell you, that there is one thing, that it was cost plus.

Kaiser could just turn in a bill for anything, whatever it cost, and then put their profit on top of it. So they always had plenty of men. Money was no object, or manpower. You always had plenty of guys.

We got called in on emergencies. We moved one rig from one way to another way. We would have to lay railroad tracks down. It would run on railroad tracks. You had railroad tracks in about fifty-foot sections. The rig would just move down the thing. We would have to shim it up and move it on down and bring the electric cable with you. Of course, the electricians did that.

I got a lot of overtime in. I made a lot of money. At \$1.20 an hour, boy, I'll tell you, I really thought I was rich.

Dunning: I've heard a few stories about how some people would punch in on the clock and then disappear and punch out later. Did that go on much?

Mays: That would be very easy to do. You could cover for a guy. If he had something to do you could cover for him. He would punch in and could get back out. He wouldn't have to stay. Or if he had a hangover or was sick you could leave him in the loft and the rest of us would do the work. I know that there went on.

They tell that story where that one guy carried an instrument around, a surveying instrument. He had it on his shoulder. He carried it all around. He saw a guy following. Every place he went, why that guy was right behind him.

Finally he stopped and he said, "You got me. I'm not really a surveyor. You got me. I don't know nothing about surveying."

This guy says, "Well, you better. I'm your helper."

So a lot of them faked it. Of course, when I got into welding--you can't fake welding. That's one thing. Finally I advanced from the grease gun to a welder. If you put a bad weld in they know it right away because they would x-ray it.

Dunning: Did you go through any training before you were the greaser?

Mays: No. That doesn't take too much training. They just show you where you have to grease the different points. They went around with me for a couple hours and from then on every rig is typical.

But a lot of people were too high and mighty to carry a grease gun, too. They figured it was like some jobs, like janitor jobs. They think it's a little degrading. But I could take that grease gun and I would make more money than the guy working on the cable or doing the welding. I did good on the grease gun.

Dunning: So you weren't any kind of a snob?

Mays: No, I was there for the money. I was there for the money until I got drafted.



Dunning: That was after you went to welding school?

Mays: Yes.

Dunning: Would you talk about the training program for welding?

Mays: Well, it was very good. They furnished everything, but they didn't pay you to go. You couldn't get paid to go to welding school, but if you wanted to enlist and go on your own in the evening it was wide open. They had instruction and they had the material and they had the cutting machines.

I remember we would weld plates. They were about eight by eight. You would weld that plate up and then they would cut it. They would cut three coupons out of that plate. The eight inch by one inch, and then they would bend one one way and bend the other one the other way, and the third one I guess they x-rayed. But they would test you free. You just take a plate up there and they would cut it and test it for you. If you made any errors they were right on you.

They had very good instructors. The instructors were all paid. You had all the welding rod and material you wanted, and the machine and the bench. You checked your uniform out--the leathers and the hood and everything. You just walked in there and checked it out every evening. I went there for a couple of months. Like I say, I was there when that ship at Port Chicago blew up.

Women Welders

Dunning: Then was it fairly easy to get a welding job?

Mays: Oh, yes. They were crying for welders. There was a lot of girls. Women make the most beautiful welders when they finally get away from being scared of being burnt or anything. I've seen them. I would compare their work to a lace curtain. They were so articulate. Welding is consistency in doing the same thing over and over and over. They excelled. The most beautiful welding I ever saw was done by women. There was a lot of them.

Dunning: Were there many women in your first welding crew?

Mays: Yes. There were no women in the ironworker part where I was. After I got out of welding school I welded on the rigs. That was my job, maintenance, making booms. If they would need a boom, why I would make a boom. A boom is the arm that sticks out the cable so they could reach out. I would make that boom. Then I got to stay right in the shop except on emergencies. A lot of times I would have to go up and weld something on the rigs. After I got to be a welder, then I got a little bit more money.

Dunning: Were you invited to join the ironworkers union at that point?

Mays: No, I did it when I went in as a grease monkey. You were compelled to. Every part of the shipyard had a



union. Sometimes, I guess, it kind of overlapped, but you had to be a union member. I think the girls in the office, even they were union. Kaiser was a complete union thing.

I joined Local 378 then. It was the union that hired you. Kaiser would call in and say what they needed in men, and you would go through the union and they would send you out. You didn't go looking for the job; the union sent you out. You didn't have to go be interviewed or anything. Of course, you had to be qualified.

#### Women and Minorities in the Ironworkers Union

Dunning: Were there any women or minorities in the union at that time?

Mays: No minorities and no women. You know, that's just happened in the last five or six years in the ironworkers. Now we've got some women and we have minorities. We didn't have no blacks and no women, but now they have them.

Dunning: Do you remember that being an issue then? Do you remember blacks trying to get into that union, or women?

Mays: No. I don't think that had even crossed their mind to be an ironworker because ironworkers get paid more or less for taking chances. You see guys walk around on

iron on these structural buildings. A lot of people, that just isn't their cup of tea so they just didn't want it.

But now they're with the government projects. That's where it's coming in. When the government sponsors or pays part of the bill, so many of them have to be a minority. If it isn't, they'll withhold their money. A lot of times, even in the ironworkers, we would have them come out just as a token and they wouldn't do anything. [laughs] They didn't have to know nothing and didn't have to do nothing, just be there as a token person so we could fill our job.

But I think now they're holding up their end, the women too. Most of the women are welder helpers. They do a little lesser job. They don't get up there and connect iron. But we sure got women in there now. Of course, I've been retired for ten years so I never had to work with a women. I worked with one black. We had an apprentice black. I only worked with one black. He was a heck of a nice guy, too.

#### Work on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge

Dunning: What was your feeling about working with women? How do you think it would have affected you back then during the war?

Mays: I don't think of myself as prejudiced. I would have done it. But there were so many other jobs that were

better for women than ironwork that I wouldn't have recommended it. I think I would have worked with them. Yes, I would have worked with them, but I think it would have been a very awkward situation, like out on the bridge. I worked three years on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, and that would be an awkward situation out there.

Dunning: Awkward in what way?

Mays: Even for your--

Dunning: You can be candid.

Mays: Yes. Out there, I know, when those guys gotta go, they gotta go. You have toilets there, but they never go back to the toilets. They just went right there on the bridge wherever they're at.

We found out by accident that these guy were wetting right on the net that was supposed to save our life. We were up what? A hundred and fifty, two hundred feet? If we fell we were supposed to fall in that net and it would save your life. One day--the net was about a year old--a box of bolts fell off the iron, fell in the net, and went right through. It went right through. It had rotted the net. So they got to examine it, and sure enough, that net wouldn't have held a man.

Dunning: It's a good thing it was a box of bolts.

Mays: Yes, it's a good thing it was a box of bolts instead of a man going through there. It wouldn't have held

if he went feet first or head first. Now, if he were sprawled out--usually when you land in a net--I've jumped in a lot of nets for kicks--you spread eagle so you cover a lot of territory. Then it might have held you, but if you went feet first you would have went right through that net. It would never stop you a minute.

So the guys started talking about that and they didn't do that anymore. We started for our protection to protect the nets wherever possible.

Having women workers there would be an awkward situation. And then men out there, they work with their shirts off, and it's hard work. You have to climb. I don't think it would be any place for a woman myself, but they're out here climbing telephone poles now and thinking nothing of it, so I could be wrong. I've been wrong before.

Dunning: I think perhaps I'll close up for today if it's okay with you. Would you be available for another session?

Mays: Yes. Maybe I can find those pictures.

Dunning: That would be great.

Mays: I have one picture of myself on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge. One time, we got lost in the fog out in the bay and didn't get out to the job on the bridge until noon. It was so foggy we couldn't find the bridge so we just sat inside one of these landing barges. We sat in that landing barge all morning long.

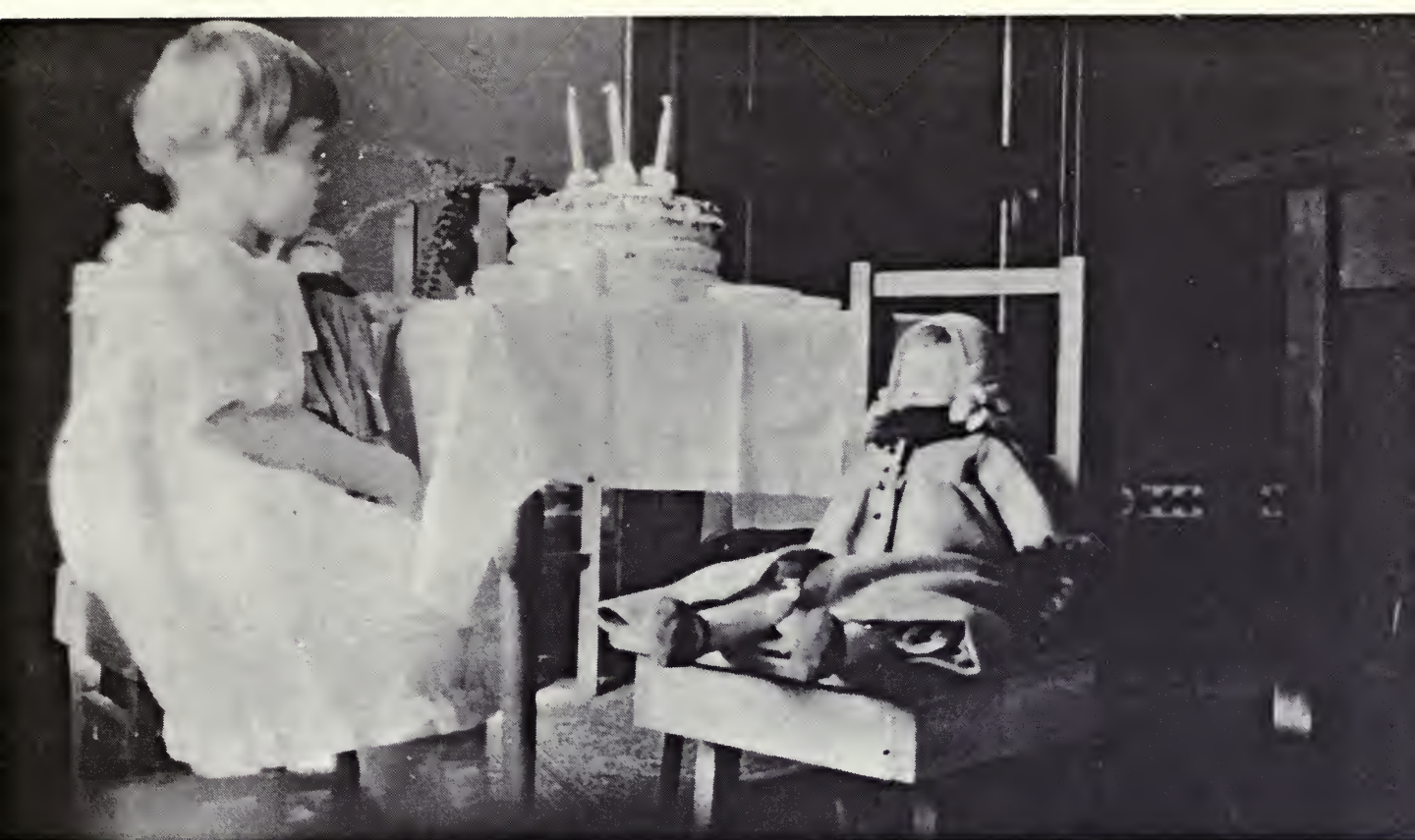


Dunning: I'd like to hear more about your work in the shipyards, and then you mentioned that you did some work on the whaling vessels. I'm also very interested in the work on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge.

Mays: I used to watch those ships come under the bridge there, and they would have a whale tied on both sides, a great big old whale. Poor old Humphrey, maybe his grandfather.

##





Virginia Mays' birthday party, Iowa, 1920.



Family photo, Iowa, 1919.







Mays family portrait, 1930. *Clockwise from center back:* Florence Mays holding baby Bobbie, Ira Dale, Donny, Elaine, Ervin, and Truman.







Ira Dale Mays, Navy, Shoemaker, California, 1945.







*Above left:*  
Mays family after church  
on Easter Sunday, 1949.

*Above right:*  
Virginia and Ira Dale  
Mays' home in Richmond,  
1948.

Terry Mays and the family's new Chevy, Easter, 1952.







*Left: Mays family Christmas card, 1951.*

BEST WISHES FOR A

*Merry  
Christmas  
The Dale Mays Family*

*Below left: Steven Mays, Richmond, ca. 1950.*

*Below right: Terry Mays, Richmond, 1950s.*









*Left: Ira Dale Mays (right)*  
and his father Jesse Mays,  
Market Street, San Francisco,  
ca. 1952.



*Below: Ira Dale Mays by his*  
new car, Richmond, 1953.







THE  
SPORTING  
MAN

Ira Dale Mays and the 325 lb. bear, Christmas, 1949.



Dale with his limit of trout, 1960s.



Dale and his dog Drive, Richmond, 1960s.







Ira Dale Mays working on the Richmond — San Rafael Bridge, 1956.





Life in the Kaiser Shipyards

[Interview 2: December 3, 1985] ##

Dunning: I want to start off by talking a little more about your work in the shipyards. What was the atmosphere of the shipyards when you first started working?

Mays: Well, I had never seen anything quite like it. It was more like a big carnival than anything else. There was so much activity and so many people. We were coming from a smaller town, and to pull into something like the shipyard where this thing went round the clock and it was so big that it was just like stepping into another world.

Every noon hour, of course, we had entertainment and they were out there selling bonds. We had a lot of celebrities.

I don't think anybody worked too hard, but they had so many of us that they got the job done. Of course, some of us must have been working pretty hard. But it was kind of a carnival atmosphere. They made you feel good about being a shipyard worker, that you were doing your part for the war, you know.

Dunning: Did you feel patriotic? Was that really pushed?

Mays: Yes, I think so. I think they endowed that to you. They got you to buy bonds. They were very

appreciative. The work wasn't too hard and the pay was good. I would say it was something I had never seen before. I had never even seen an ocean or didn't even know what a boat looked like, or a ship. I couldn't imagine a ship being a block long, or two blocks long, until I got out here.

But the atmosphere there in the one that I was in was very good. It really felt like we were part of the war. We made the four-day ship that time. There was always something going on to emphasize the war. They played music over the P.A. system. If you didn't want to go down and watch the noontime festivities you could hear it over the P.A. system.

### Security Measures

Dunning: Do you recall security measures that were enforced during wartime?

Mays: Yes. They were quite strict. As I mentioned earlier, in my wife's case, she was German and she had been to Germany twice. She worked at the shipyard on the IBM machine. They investigated her quite a few times. Of course, they couldn't find anything. I was ex-national guard. I had been in the national guard. I had been in the different services. They didn't bother me any.

Dunning: How about blackouts? Do you recall those?

Mays: We never had any blackouts while I was there. They had big signs all around, "Loose lips sink ships." If you were in the know on launchings, you probably weren't supposed to talk about that. But no, I can't remember any security other than checking us in and out and seeing that we didn't steal any of the shipyard tools. That security was there.

### Job Supervision

Dunning: How closely were you supervised in your job?

Mays: Well, I had about nineteen rigs. A rig is a Washington rig, a rig that goes up and down the ways that puts the material up on the ship or builds the ship. My job most of the time I was there was just to maintain those rigs. I belonged to the 378, structural ironworkers, and they had gotten the maintenance on the cranes. They were called Washington cranes.

We took care of putting all new cable on. When we put new cable on it we would usually do it during the noon hour. If it needed a whip line or a load line--it carries two lines, and then it has the boom line that lifts the boom up and down.

If a line was bad a crew of us of about six guys would go in at noon. We would take that old line off and put the new line on and have it ready to go by the time the people got back to work. The noon hour was

over. We used to get a lot of that. Then we would get overtime for that. We made a little bit extra. But I would get in on that. I would get in on the changing of the lines. Sometimes we had to change booms. That was our work, maintenance.

I was pretty much my own boss. I had a schedule, and I would just mark down when I had completed that job on a chart in the office. Two and three times a week I would go by and check them.

But we had to climb up a ladder. We would have had to climb up about fifty feet and then walk out the boom, which was probably about ninety feet long. And check the shivs, check the cable, see that there was grease, and grease them. My job was maintenance.

Dunning: This was after you had gone to welding school?

Mays: No, this was before and during. After I had got out of welding school, then they put me to welding. I still carried the grease gun quite a bit. A lot of guys were too proud to do it. It was one of the lower type jobs, to walk around there with a grease gun. It's about like a street sweeper. I would carry it anyway. It didn't make any difference to me if the money was there. It paid the same money.

I did the welding then, and the greasing, too. I've done the maintenance work. I started building booms, and I would do repair work after I graduated from the Kaiser school, which was free, and they furnished everything. But you had to go on your own time.



Dunning: That was a couple of months long?

Mays: Oh, no. I must have went there for about six months.

Dunning: Six months?

Mays: That was the evenings, a couple evenings a week. To pass the Kaiser test it was pretty rough. There was some of them that went in there, like a girl went in there once, that stayed right with it. They went in as a welder and they just trained them as welders. They would have them out of there in probably a month.

Dunning: Yes, because I did speak to one woman, and she was hired as a welder. She went to the welding school and didn't remember having to go on her own time. She remembers being paid during the training. But that may have been right at the very beginning.

Mays: Yes. See, I couldn't hire out as a welder. I was in maintenance, so I had to learn welding. To do that I had to go to school on my own. If I had switched over to boilermaker or something like that, maybe they would have paid me, but I was better off the way I was. It was a better deal for me.

Dunning: And you pretty much learned the ropes from your father in terms of getting into the ironworkers union?

Mays: Oh, yes. He's the one that pulled strings for me and got me in the ironworkers union, which I am very grateful for to this day. I have a very good retirement and hospitalization, Kaiser. I'll go out

on a limb for Kaiser. I'm very grateful that I did make the move and stayed with the ironworkers.

Dunning: Were there certain rules at the workplace, like smoking, eating, talking?

Mays: No. I can't remember any. Of course, there would be some areas that would be a no-no for smoking. No, I think it was pretty loose. You could do your own thing pretty much.

Did I smoke then? Yes, I smoked. I don't think I had any problem with it. Of course, they were dead set on drinking. We never even knew about dope then. I guess I was fifty years old before I started learning anything about dope.

Dunning: Do you think it went on in the yard?

Mays: There was some drinking that went on. They would smuggle a bottle in. Especially at Christmas. It was funny. They would celebrate the day before Christmas and they wouldn't celebrate New Year's Eve. Christmas, I remember, used to be the big thing. They had all kinds of things going on. The girls in the boilerhouse and the plate shop, they really put on some shows there. The guys drank a lot, too. That was our big day, the day before Christmas, I remember.

Dunning: Would you get off early, or did the shipyard go on as usual?

Mays: We never got no time off. But they would let us have a party on the job. They wanted you on the job. Absenteeism was a no-no. They wanted you there.

I think a lot of it was cost plus. They would figure what the job cost them and then they would put their profit on top of that, so the more that they could run the costs up, the more profit they made. I'm quite sure that there was a lot of those jobs that were overmanned. You had to stand in line to work. But they got the job done, that's the main thing. They were building them ships, and some of them were pretty good.

They had good welders, especially in the girls. I always admired the women, how they took to welding. You wouldn't think so. When they finally get rid of the fright of the sparks and of getting burnt, why then they settle down and they make beautiful welders.

#### Women and Men Working Together

Dunning: But when you were in maintenance did you have a lot of contact with women?

Mays: Yes, I met a lot of them. I know there was some hanky panky going on, especially the women with their supervisors trying to get up the ladder. I know that there went on, but I was never a supervisor so I never had that. But there wasn't any in the ironworkers.



But out in the field, they were in the double bottoms and all that.

Dunning: Are there any particular women that stand out in your mind?

Mays: I've seen some. I've seen some pretty good ones, like at Christmastime, them girls, they went topless when they got to drinking. I know a lot of the girls that used their femininity. They would come in not feeling good, and they were in good with the boss and he owed them a favor, they would get back in the double bottom and sleep. I know some of that there went on, quite a bit of it. Rosy the Riveter, you know, and all that there.

I couldn't name names, but anytime you throw men and women like that together it breeds trouble. I know. I worked in the packing house for nine years before I came to California. About a third of them were women. They would come in there, beautiful, upright, married women, and pretty soon somebody would sweet talk them, and they would be unhappy divorced women. That there I know went on some in the shipyards, too.

Dunning: Were there any marriages that you knew about among your friends?

Mays: Marriages in the shipyards?

Dunning: I've heard that there were many marriages made and broken.



Mays: Yes. There probably was.

Ironworkers' Reputation

Dunning: You were married?

Mays: Yes, I was married. I carried my little boy every day on my shoulders to the nursery while I was there, and would pick him up every night. I had mine cut out.

I know I used to go to union meetings, and the union meeting then was over in Oakland. They would have a beer bust. Somebody would make a motion that we take \$150 or \$200 and buy beer. Boy, we used to throw some parties right there, right at the union meeting. And fights. Ironworkers are the worst ones in the world to fight. They would rather fight than eat.

Dunning: Why do you think that is?

Mays: I don't know. I think they're arrogant. They think they're the best. If somebody tells them they ain't, they'll fight them for it. They're rough-tough. That's what they get paid for. They get the high wages. They're getting probably around \$19 an hour now. One of the reasons is the chances they take. They don't live as long as other people, unless you get out in time.

They do fight a lot, even over at the union hall. They could hardly ever go through a meeting without somebody standing up and telling you, "You ask me to sit down," and, "You try to make me," and there we go. That's the way. They used to appropriate money. We had plenty of money in the treasury because everybody who came in payed doby. Doby, you had to pay extra.

Dunning: Doby? What is that?

Mays: If you were out of town and you have a book in another local and you throw your book in here, you might have to pay dues to your own local, but you pay doby here. Doby might be about \$20 a month that they would have to pay our local.

This was always a joke with the business agent. They wanted to know where the doby money went. It wasn't accounted for too good. That's another way I know that they did a little conniving, is they would have people on the payroll that didn't exist. There was one of our business agents that got let go on account of that. He had put a man on the payroll and picked up his check, and he didn't even exist.

Dunning: Was the business agent an elected official?

Mays: Yes. That's just one of them. I wouldn't name names, but I know it did happen. I know I would, back in my drinking days--

Dunning: Which was when?

Mays: I would say about thirty years ago. I haven't drank in about thirty years. But when beer and liquor were free, like when I was at Smorgy Bobs, I overdid it. I know I've come home from that union meeting and have to get up the next morning and look out to see if my car was there. That was a pretty regular event. If you went to a union meeting, you knew you would get all the beer and whiskey you wanted free.

Dunning: How often would there be meetings?

Mays: Once a month. That's when they would celebrate. Not every time, but most of the time, they would have that. That was a highlight of going to meetings.

Dunning: I wanted to ask you, did you consider your work at the shipyard dangerous?

Mays: Yes. I only had climbed a tree before I ever came to California. That there would probably only be a thirty or forty foot tree, and then they put you up where you have to climb fifty feet up a rig and then walk out a boom on a catwalk. Of course, they had a handrail. I didn't know whether I could do it at first. My dad went with me and gave me confidence.

Yes, it was dangerous. There was always something to break or something to fall off. Now, there in the maintenance work it was pretty much routine. A lot of the greasing was right inside the housing and not out on the boom.

Then when I went into the welding part, I remember I would have to get in a barrel, and they

would burn holes in it and put slings on it, and take me up, and I welded the counterbalance in the rigs. One rig would take me up and I would weld on the other rig. I've welded out of that. Maybe I would be sixty, seventy feet in the air and staying in a barrel. I would have to weld that there thing up. You would have to tie yourself in.

### Pranks in the Shipyard

Mays: I know that one sucker--I was coming down and I let my lead lines down, and he swung me out over the bay in that barrel. Then he stopped out there and lowered me right down in the water. The thing leaked. He just lowered me right down into the water and I was standing in a barrel, and the barrel leaked, and I was climbing the cable. They were all laughing out there. They had me good. There was a lot of that there craziness.

I know this one guy who had a steamroller, and that was a big deal there. This one guy, he went out to smoke. I think he just took a break, and while he was gone they stole his steamroller. They had that all over the shipyard. Somebody stole the steamroller. They took it way out and hid that thing behind a rig. That there operator was out looking for his steamroller.



A lot of that went on, too. A lot of pranks went on, yes. I remember those there, too, where they put me down in the bay and got me wet.

Dunning: Did you know it was a joke?

Mays: Oh, yes. I knew all those. When you're oiling like that you have quite a bit of time. You've got nineteen rigs. Well, I had seven days to do it in. So maybe I only had to do three rigs a day, three or four. Five if I had done them once a week, or if I was going to do it twice that week.

You would go up there and he would be sitting there pulling the controls and operating, and you're behind there talking to him. Maybe you might stay an hour and talk to him. They like that. You have coffee and coke and just sit there and visit. So I got to know every operator in the whole shipyard. They were all men, too. We never had any women operators.

Dunning: Did you learn shortcuts in performing your work? Or it sounds like on your particular schedule you really didn't need to know shortcuts.

Mays: No, I really didn't need to because there was just enough there to keep me busy anyway. If you get to know the operator, he would tell you if anything was wrong. He would know. The operator knows first, just like you and your car. If it's going "Kerklunk, Kerklunk," you know it first because you're driving. That there's the way with the operators. They would call me up and tell me that they had trouble and I

would go check it out. Sometimes the bearing would go out on the shives, and he could see that it was moving, or if he could see where the line was shredding, or something was slipping.

They were a real good bunch of guys, the operating engineers local 3. I made a lot of real good friends. I still see some of them around today.

### Dangers of the Trade

Dunning: Did you ever have any close calls?

Mays: Yes, I've had close calls. I outran a load that slipped off of a truck. It was coming right for me, and it lit right behind me. I was down by the truck and I could see the thing coming. It was going to slide off. I outran that. Another time I lost this eyebrow, this whole eyebrow, out on the San Rafael Bridge.

Dunning: How did that happen?

Mays: Well, they have a big rig they called the Judy-Ann. It was a water rig that they had on the barge, the Judy-Ann. That was what they set the bridge iron with. It would reach up there, all the way up. That had a terrific boom. I think that there thing could go up probably two hundred feet.

It was a water rig on a barge, and they were putting in a street beam. A street beam is the one that goes across the bridge where they lay the concrete. I was bolting up. I was a welder out there, too, but I had to bolt up when I wasn't welding. I was bolting up on a scaffold. We had scaffolding that was a four-by-eight piece of plywood. A float is what we called it.

I was on that there float, and they were bringing that street beam in there. They got one side hooked and then they were going to make the other. They couldn't swing far enough. The Judy-Ann wouldn't swing far enough, so they tightened up on their anchor. They didn't know how much power they had when they tightened up on that anchor. It snapped this bolt on the other side.

The street beam was hooked with just one choker in the middle, and when it broke it just went like a toothpick, or like a pencil on a string. It just went all over. It hit right above my head when it came my way. It was going to come again, so I scooted from my float to the outside float. It was about ten inches underneath the main girder there. I slid from one float to the other.

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Mays: I hit a driftpin. You see, to line those holes up, you have to put in a barrel-shaped pin. They're mushroomed from hitting them with a beater all the time. I hit one of those as I went under from one to the other. I tore my eyebrow off.

I went under and I came up the other side. These guys saw me and they thought that I had been hit in the head. I would have if I had stayed there. It smashed the float. Then two guys jumped, one on each side of me, and they held on to me, held me so tight.

I told them, "I'm not hurt. I'm not hurt." But here I am all blood and I'm telling them I'm not hurt. The only thing that happened to me was just that it took my whole eyebrow off. I never got hit with the iron. But if I had stayed there I'd have got hit.

Dunning: So you've had to move quickly.

Mays: Oh, yes. If I hadn't gotten out of there--yes.

Dunning: Do you think you develop an instinct for survival in situations like that?

Mays: Oh, definitely, definitely. To this day I've attributed that to premeditate what is going to happen. I've seen that, that I can just about know whether it's going to work or isn't going to work, and what is going to happen. I think that I'm among the living today because I have done that.

I've seen guys down in Walnut Creek, they just set on a piece of iron and cut that iron, and away, just cut it all the way around and it went right down the hole, right down a hopper. Two of them got killed. I was the steward there. I had to take them to the hospital, or call the hospital. One guy didn't



need it; he had a hole in his head the size of a tennis ball. I saw them get killed.

I've seen quite a few of them get killed, maybe eighteen. One guy went off the bridge when he was out there, and he had all his tools on. He couldn't get his belt off. You know, you get bolts and all your tools on, you might be carrying fifty pounds in that belt. If you go in the water and you don't go feet first or head first, and it knocks you out, you can't get your belt off. Why, the fifty pounds will just keep you down.

Dunning: Like an anchor.

Mays: Yes. We had to fish for him. There are a lot of things out there. I've been out there and never had to work all morning. Never found the job until noon. We would go--

Dunning: You started to tell me that. This is about the Richmond-San Raphael Bridge?

Mays: Yes.

Dunning: You began that story last week.

Mays: Yes. We would go out there and we would get in the landing crafts. We had landing crafts to take us out there. They take you right up the beach and leave the door out and put you on the beach. The fog, like it was this morning, you get out there and you couldn't find the bridge. They would go out there and they would think they were going the right way, and we

couldn't find it until the fog came up. We would just sit there and smoke and yak.

Dunning: Where would you pick up the barge?

Mays: Right at the end of Cutting. That's where we loaded and unloaded, right there. I set the first piece of iron on that bridge. The first piece of iron.

Dunning: Do you remember many stories from the shipyard?

Mays: Oh, yes. I remember a lot of the ironworkers. My foreman, his name was Max Redman. I don't know how they got up the ladder there either. There might have been a little hanky panky going on there. But they had so many officers. They had supervisors, and quartermen, and lead men. About half the people there would be supervisors, and the other half would be peons.

Dunning: What a hierarchy.

Mays: Yes. If you had thirty men, fifteen of them were supervisors, or they fit in some category. They had a title. I never did have a title. After I left there I was foreman a lot, but in the shipyard I was very content to just not make any waves, stay in the background, and make all the money.

I made more money than a lot of them. I've done that all my life. A lot of times people think they've got me, but I'll wind up doing better than they do.

Richmond Whaling Station

Mays: I think I told you about the whaling ships that used to come through the San Rafael Bridge. We sat there and watched them come in with a whale tied on each side. This one time, I was in the yard and they needed some welding done. I welded on a whaling ship. I guess that ship is still around. They had a write-up here a while back about it.

Dunning: I was reading in the paper that there's supposedly only one whaling ship left in the whole West Coast now.

Mays: Yes. That was it.

Dunning: The man was trying to sell it for \$30,000. I was thinking it would be great if it stayed in Richmond. You could have a museum on it.

Mays: Oh, yes. They still have the whaling shacks out there you know. They still stink.

Dunning: The rendering plant down there?

Mays: Yes. I went out there and got dog meat. We used to feed that whale meat to the dogs. I've seen those great big jaw bones out there, and how they turn the whales over and pull the blubber off. They did that mostly mechanically. They would get a strip started and then just cut it. But it was quite an operation out there.

Dunning: The whaling station didn't start until the 1950s in Richmond. Actually, it was a pretty short operation, from the '50s to the '70s.

Mays: Yes, it was. I guess the whales are coming back. They stopped them in time. But when you think of something like that [that's] that big, and you take a chance of extinction, it was a pretty morbid thing to do.

Dunning: Did you think about it at that time?

Mays: Well, I've always thought that a whale didn't have much of a chance. They have to come up for air. They would spot one and they would just go over there and wait until he came up for air. They might be only fifty feet from them. I've had them come up fifty feet from me out on the ocean when I was out there salmon fishing. Boy, I'll tell you that's a thrill.

Dunning: What kind of whale?

Mays: I don't know what kind. A big one. Man, a big one! It could have tipped over our boat. It was twenty-five or thirty feet. It came right alongside us and it just came up and blew. If it had gotten underneath the boat it would have just thrown us right out. But I guess they know where they're at.

You see that there big old gun in the front of that whaling boat and you know it has got to go all the way in the whale, and then it opens up. I think it's got a charge on the inside, a lethal charge that



explodes. Isn't that terrible? It's a terrible thing.

I had a chance to go out whaling. I was invited to go out. If I hadn't been working seven days a week I would have; if I hadn't been so money hungry. I wish I would have went now, just to say I was on a whaling ship. I've been on one quite a few times, but to actually go out and shoot. I could have shot it. They would let me shoot one if I had went out, probably.

Dunning: Do you think you would have?

Mays: Yes. I've done a lot of things. I've killed a lot of bear. I've killed a lot of bear and deer. But the bear and deer we always ate. I don't feel so bad if I kill something and I'm going to use it, but just wanton killing, I don't think I ever did do that. I've killed some unwanted dogs and cats, but I've had second thoughts about that, too.

#### Health Hazards for Ironworkers

Dunning: One thing that's coming up into the forefront these days are health issues. I'm wondering if there was any emphasis, or did you think about your job as being hazardous in terms of the toxins you were around. A lot of people from the shipyard are coming up with asbestosis and different lung diseases. Did you think about it?

Mays: I don't know. I've done a lot of welding of galvanized material. Even some of the companies used to give you a quart of milk. They gave you a quart of milk as an antidote for getting sick. You get sick, nauseated, from welding galvanized material. It seemed that if you drank milk you didn't do it.

Dunning: What is galvanized?

Mays: Well, like grating. The shiny stuff that they dip right over here at Bethlehem Steel. They still have a dip over there where they galvanize. They galvanize all the electrical poles, now, the metal ones, and the hand rails, and the grating, and a lot of things. I think it's tin, galvanized tin. Yes.

They make tin in a liquid, and then they take and put some kind of chemical on the iron, and then they dip it in this hot metal, and about a sixteenth of an inch will adhere to it. Just like gold plated, well, this is tin plated. But if you have to weld that together, why it really fogs up and really smokes. I've done a lot of that.

I don't know why, but my lungs haven't bothered me. And I've welded in and around a lot of asbestos, where there's been asbestos and a lot of smoke. I've welded inside chimneys, stainless steel. A big chimney where we put grating all the way around. It seems like my lungs are okay. No asbestos. I could have put in for it because I was in that work. I would have to perjure myself because I've got no ill

effects from it. Of course, I quit smoking about thirty-five years ago.

Dunning: I asked you about that.

Mays: A lot of those guys, they would work inside those chimneys, or those smokestacks. Maybe it would only be about five feet across and we had to work right around and had scaffolding going up. You put hex metal in there. It's hex shaped. Then you have to push this hex metal against the walls, and it's about a half an inch thick. It's like expanded metal, like grating.

You push that into the wall with a hydraulic, and then you weld it to the outside. Then they put concrete or asbestos or whatever they put in there so it insulates the pipe and it lasts longer. I've seen guys work for a couple hours and come out coughing. They can't stand the smoke and can't stand this, and then they light up a big cigarette. They would get right out of there and complain about smoke and then just start smoking again. Kind of dumb. I did it for a good while. I smoked for seventeen years. I was as dumb as they were.

Dunning: What made you stop?

Mays: Well, my dad had--he called it a tobacco heart. It was awful hard for him to give up smoking. He gave up two doctors who wanted him to quit smoking. If they insisted he quit smoking he would just change doctors. There's about four of us boys who don't smoke right now. I attribute it to this: our dad was a victim,



and we saw what it did to him, the hack and cough. He got sugar diabetes, too, then. With a weak heart, it got him. Of course, he was about seventy-two years old.

I think that's why I quit. I knew it was a bad thing. I didn't want my kids to do it, and you can't hardly say, "Do as I say, not do as I do." So I quit. I quit cold turkey.

I quit while I was on the San Rafael Bridge. I was working with a boxer out there, and he didn't smoke. He was my buddy in bolting up. It was very easy, when you work with somebody that doesn't smoke, and my wife doesn't smoke. Where I had kept the cigarettes I put black Smith Brothers cough drops. Every time I would think I couldn't stand no more I would take a cough drop.

Dunning: So that worked?

Mays: It worked. In about three days I was all right. It was probably forty years ago and I've never had a cigarette since. I'm sure glad. When I was in the navy, cigarettes were five cents a package. We could buy a whole carton of ten for fifty cents.

That's what we used to do a lot of times. You would call it pitch a carton. You go to town to pitch a carton of cigarettes. You could buy them for fifty cents and take them to town and get a dollar or a dollar and a half for them. We would double our money and then we would spend the money as profit.



Like the guy said, at a nickel a pack it was so cheap that you couldn't afford not to smoke. But if they give them away the price wouldn't be right. Now I see them advertise cigarettes for \$1.25, \$1.20. Isn't that ridiculous? People ruin their health and pay that kind of money.

### Alcohol Problems

Dunning: What about the health of some of your coworkers? You've probably known many through many decades.

Mays: I think most of the ironworkers I know, their biggest health problem was in a bottle, was liquor. That got more of them than anything. They would all figure they could lick the bottle, and it didn't work. I think a lot of tombstones, if you really put down what they died from, it was probably liquor and cigarettes.

But a lot of them, their life was cut short by accidents. A lot of them ruined their health by smoking and drinking, not taking care of themselves. I go to the union meeting now. We have an oldtimer's club and I go there. I see some of them. I don't know. Sometimes I feel that you go away depressed because they're so old.

Dunning: No one would ever guess your age, so--

Mays: Yes. I'm sixty-eight. It's just been the last few years I've really been trying to take care of myself.

I've only been working out for a year and a half. Three days a week.

Dunning: Did you get plenty of physical exercise on your job?

Mays: Oh, yes, usually. And then hunting. I've done hunting and fishing all of my life. I know I can remember when I was bear hunting and I did smoke. That's another of the reasons. I would try to follow the dogs. That's one thing you have to do as a bear hunter; you have to be thinking like a dog and go like a dog. You have to go. I've got to the top of mountains and top of hills and just sat there and thrown up I would be so exhausted and out of wind.

I would say, "I'm going to throw these damnable cigarettes away." In a little bit I would say, "Well, one more."

My wife died of cancer just a little over a year ago. I know I have to take care of myself now. She isn't around here to take care of me. I think I'm more health conscious now than I've ever been in all my life. I've got a lot of things the matter with me. I've got kidney stones, I've got a heart murmur, and this and that. But I can take care. I'm a diabetic, but I can adjust that too by the way I eat, which is very hard. I love sweets.

Dunning: Well, we won't talk about sweets, particularly with the Christmas season coming up. Were there ever any times when you wanted to quit the ironworkers?

Mays: No. I never wanted to. After I left Iowa and came out here and got more money, and there are so many facets to California and to the ironworkers. In those days, if you didn't like one job you could quit and go get another one, go to work for somebody else. I've done that a lot. I've worked as high as fifteen different contractors in one year. I never quit. The job would just finish up. Some guy would contract to put up a building, you put the building up, and then you were all done. So you would go get another job.

No, I've always been fascinated by ironwork, especially after I got to welding. That's what I recommend to any young person who goes into the construction business, to learn welding first, because you'll always be the last man on the job. Especially if you can do the rigging, do the connecting, do it all. If you can do it all, and then the welding, too. I and a foreman a lot of times would be the only guys on the job, by being able to do it all.

Dunning: You were really flexible.

Mays: Yes. Not that I was that great, but I just took time to learn that one facet, and that there is what I attribute that to. It's pretty easy work. Most of the time you sit on a box and weld. You sit down most of the time and weld.

The more comfortable you are, the better welding you'll do. If you're uncomfortable you can't--if you're pulling on a lead or you're not comfortable, you can't. It's like writing. If you had to stretch



all out to write, you couldn't do it so good. The main thing is to get comfortable.

I think I put it on the tape there, didn't I, about when I was working on the Bank of America building? I was on the nineteenth floor of the Bank of America building, welding, and on a float. I was welding a column. That there is all welded together with automatic welders.

I was welding the columns that actually make the building, make the height. I was on a float, a four-by-eight float right up next to the column. They put decking down. They put the concrete on a galvanized decking. It's a decking, but it has holes to reinforce it, to make its strength. Then they put the concrete on that.

It's big enough to put a torch in, this hole. This hole was right in front of me, this decking, and I was welding on this column. I put that torch in there. You had to preheat all the welds. You had a chalk there, and you had to heat them to one hundred and forty degrees before you could start welding or it would break. It wouldn't take it. You had to preheat everything. So I preheated it and got it hot, and put the torch in that hole, which is just a little cubby hole there.

The torch leaked. When I got up that high welding it exploded. It came out of there. The guys that saw it said the fire shot out for thirty feet. The fire shot right out of that tube. It's just like a tube. It was about three by five, and it shot right



out that tube. It knocked my welding hood off and I was deaf for two days. I had to read lips.

Oh man, what a noise. We were downtown. There were windows come up all over. That was on the nineteenth floor, but there was windows come up all over. People thought that somebody had dropped a bomb or something. My ears bled. They had to take me to the doctor.

I only lost one day's work and I was back. That was very close. If that thing had hit me direct, if it hadn't just been a little bit high here, and if it had hit me right direct it would have done me in. I was tied off. You have a safety belt. I staggered a little bit. My equilibrium was off for quite a while. Man, they didn't know where that explosion came from. It was loud.

Dunning: Could you have ever done an office job, or would that have driven you crazy?

Mays: Yes, I wouldn't want an office job. I don't have the expertise. I told you there one time I used to get nervous indigestion in my stomach. It would be where I had to do something using my head.

Dunning: But you had to use your head a lot in your job just to avoid hazards.

Mays: Yes, but it's all automatic. It's not premeditated, it's right now. You've got to know what to do right now. You don't premeditate. Like me and this girl used to sing in this church. We would sing a lot of

songs. They had a singing committee, and if they told me a week ahead that I had to sing, I would get a nervous stomach. I would be sick. But if they would tell me the day that we had to be there I would be all right.

That there's the same way with ironwork. You don't have to think about it, you just automatically do it. I've seen it many times where you could see a collision and get out of it. I've done it with my car. You can premeditate what's going to happen.

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Dunning: Did you work many other places on the Richmond waterfront besides the shipyard and the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge?

Mays: Do you know what the Blue Water was? It's an offshore well digging rig. It was made by Santa Fe, and it was one of the first offshore drilling rigs that they made. They made that right down there in Yard two. That was a huge thing. What did it stick up in the air? Oh, a couple hundred feet. Four columns went up two hundred feet, and then these legs jacked up on it. I welded on that.

You had to weld around the clock. We had two twelve-hour shifts. That was all preheated, too. Where we welded would be eight inches thick, and the weld would be veed out, and it might be twelve inches. You would have to [use] low hydrogen rod. It was three sixteenths, and you would just want to run one pass after another all day long.

As long as you were welding you would keep the heat up. That was four sides to that thing. We had to weld all those columns going up. They were in maybe thirty foot, forty foot sections. And go over two hundred feet and weld them all together.

Every once in a while you would be welding that thing and it would sound like somebody hit it with a big beater. Wham, you know. You would know right away that the weld broke. Somebody's weld broke. They would be welding on all four corners. All the way around there would be maybe twelve, fifteen of us welding at one time.

When you would hear that weld break, it would telegraph. You couldn't tell where it was at. You would see those hoods go up and see if it was yours. Right where the weld and the new iron came together it would break right in two. I've seen that break a lot of times.

#### Loss of Hearing

Mays: That was part of one of my jobs. Then I would have to air arch it out. That might be why I lost my hearing, too. I'm a little deaf. I would air arch it out.

Dunning: Air arch?

Mays: Air arch, yes. It's a carbon rod. Then they shoot air on it and you get this rod red hot, it melts the iron, and the air blows it out. Then I would have to take all that weld back out, go right back to basic and start all over. And it cracks all the time you're air arching. If you've ever got around it there's nothing like it. It just cracks like bacon frying, only about a hundred times louder.

You know, I never did think about wearing ear plugs. I wore a hood that would muffle it but I never wore ear plugs. Now I just had a hearing test the other day and I have about a twenty percent loss. I read lips a lot and ask questions, "What did he say?"

I think now as I look back a lot of that was from chipping. When you weld the thing you have an air gun that you have to chip, too. [imitates noise] Between chipping and air arching and riveting.

They don't rivet anymore, but we used to heat a rivet and put a knob on both ends. One end didn't have a knob end, and then you would put a knob on the other. The San Rafael Bridge has quite a few rivets in. Mostly high tensile bolts, though.

That's one thing that hurt my hearing. And then that explosion. But I get by. I suppose I could sue somebody if I wanted to. I don't want to.



Postwar Richmond

Dunning: When you returned to Richmond after the war, how did it strike you? The shipyards were closed.

Mays: There wasn't the hustle and bustle then. It settled down more to a regular California town. There wasn't the big hullabaloo going on all the time.

It seemed like Richmond was really a boom town. It was a boom town. I tell you what it was. Anyplace you went there was lines. Anything you wanted to do. If you wanted to go to a movie you had to get in line. If you wanted to bowl you had to get in line. Time was getting so if we would see a line we would just go get in it and see what it was.

I think it went downhill from then. After the government started pulling money out of there people started moving out and the housing was rundown and empty. There wasn't the excitement going on as there was during the war.

Dunning: Did you think about relocating?

Mays: Well, we went down to San Diego. My wife has a relation down there, out there on the island. I don't know. I guess our roots were here because my mother and dad were here, and all my brothers and sisters were here. We liked Richmond real well. I moved out to Pinole about twenty-six years ago. But my area in Richmond there was going predominantly black and going downhill, so--.

Recycling War Housing

Dunning: Which area was that?

Mays: Thirty-Seventh and Wall. Do you remember where the Pullman Building was? I lived right in back of that Pullman Building. I had a two-bedroom there, made it into a three-bedroom. Then I put on an apartment on the back. I tore down a Housing Authority's building.

They used to sell those housing after everybody moved out. You could buy the whole building for \$400. I mean everything. Everything in that building was yours for \$400. So I bought one and took the roof off, took all the studs out, took all the flooring out. I had all the hardwood flooring and all the plumbing. I took everything out and I built a three room apartment. It was a living room, a bedroom, bath, and a kitchen in the back of my place there at 3700 Wall for \$400.

Of course, I had to buy paint and wallboard, but I used all the flooring, the most beautiful floor you ever saw, hardwood. I had a professional come in there and sand it, and then I filled it and waxed it. At that time you could buy everything to make a five-room house if you wanted to for \$400.

Dunning: This was immediately after the war?

Mays: Yes. When people started moving out. They started moving out and they could rent them, why, they started tearing them down. But I tore the one right on Cutting Boulevard. I had a car and a trailer and I would go down there every night and Saturdays and Sundays until I tore that whole thing down. I had my boy to help me, and my wife.

We made a beautiful place. What did I pay for that place? It was ridiculous. I think I paid about \$5,000 for that house. And I put that apartment on it. It was so ridiculous. After I put the apartment on I think I got about \$21,000. I made good on that. I moved out here.

Dunning: What made you move to Pinole? You did mention the neighborhood was changing.

Mays: Yes. It was going predominantly black, and the little church I belong to is right over here on Cherry Hills Drive. I was into CB's [Citizen's Band radios]. That's another thing I liked about this place. I was right on top of a hill. I was in the CB club then. I was one of the officers. I was treasurer for a while. The CB, by being here, with the reflection off of the water from the bay, and seeing Mt. Diablo, I had one of the best signals. I would sit here night after night and talk to Hawaii. Yes, with that little five watt CB.

I still have all the equipment. KFD0175. That was my call letters. They used to call me "The Pinole Custodian." That was my handle. That was another reason. I put a tower out here, a twenty foot tower

with an antenna, a directional antenna that twirls around. I could drown out anybody. I liked that. So we bought it. Paid \$19,000 for it. I wish I had bought three of them.

Dunning: Did the rest of your family stay in the Richmond area? I know you mentioned a couple of brothers are up north.

Mays: Yes, there are some of them up near Redding. My one brother went and worked there for a while and opened a bar up there. One is in real estate, one is a judge, and one had the bar up there. They've all done good. I think Mother would be proud of us. We've all made pretty good.

#### Changes in Richmond

Dunning: How would you describe Richmond today?

Mays: I'm pretty near scared to go down there in most cases. The most I would go down now is to go to Montgomery Wards. I go to Wards, and then I bank at Imperial. Boy, I'd hate to have a flat tire on lower Macdonald anymore. I think I would drive away with it on the rim. I do go down to the Richmond Rescue Mission once in while. Mr. Lee is a friend of mine.

It's kind of depressing to see how it used to--. A woman could walk there at two o'clock in the morning and never have to worry about a thing just few years



back. Now two guys together aren't safe. It's an all together different picture.

It's a shame that it has deteriorated to this. I think a lot of that is the dope. I talked to a kid just the other day that just got off of dope. He told me that they'll do anything for dope and think they have the perfect right to do it. I think that dope is the biggest problem we have today.

My brother is a judge. I've heard him say that we ought to legalize dope and give it to them. Just give it to them. If they want dope, give it to them. If they want to kill themselves, let them kill themselves, but you wouldn't have them out here robbing old men and women to take care of the habit. They could go down and get it for nothing. Doesn't that solve the problem?

Dunning: Well, it would solve one of the many problems.

Mays: Yes, it would solve the problem, but then the moral issues of whether we should let somebody kill themselves if they want to kill themselves. I don't know. Why should they kill somebody else? That's what I think our big problem is.

I never did get into dope. Marijuana grows right out in the field there at home, right along the railroad tracks and the pig pens. Marijuana grows all over.

Dunning: At home where?

Mays: Iowa. Yes, we have marijuana all over. Fifteen years ago they thought it was a harmless weed. Now they know it isn't a harmless weed. It's mind altering. It's hurting women with babies. They're finding out a lot about it.

But Richmond itself I am very depressed about. I belong to the Senior Citizens of Richmond. They do have a nice club house, but I don't think those people are even safe down there. That's up Macdonald quite a ways. That's this side of 23rd street. I don't know what they could do. You go by some of those there liquor stores and the parking lots are full of people yelling and fighting and carrying on. Would you stop there and buy a loaf of bread? I would go without.

Dunning: When did you see downtown really changing and being torn down? A lot of the older people I've talked to are very upset that they can't do any shopping in Richmond. They can't go to a movie.

Mays: Yes, we used to have movie theaters. You could go to the show. I remember one night I and my dad decided we would go see this here--I think it was a John Wayne movie. We were going to go to the movie and I got a flash that day.

A flash is when you're welding, or somebody else is welding, usually, and out of the corner of the hood that ultra violet ray comes in there and hits your eyeball. It just burns your eyeball. It puts blisters on your eyeballs. You don't know you've got it until about three or four hours later.

I was sitting in that show and it hit me. I started crying. Man, them tears. I just went blind. They had to lead me out of the theater. I had a bad flash. Both eyes. I don't know how it got both of them. That there is what the welding hood does. They've got that dark glass in there and it blocks out the ultra violet ray. Just like if you lay out there in the sun with no glasses and just keep your eyes open. It will get you, but not like welding.

I was in that show, and I'm telling you, I didn't see much of it. I should have asked for my money back when they had to lead me out. I was only in there about twenty minutes when that hit.

It used to be you could go to movie theaters. They had about three or four of them up and down there, and a lot of little clubs and health studios. I joined a health studio there on Cutting Boulevard. The guy talked me into going for a life membership and I went for it. I joined up and I gave him a couple hundred dollars and I was a life member. All my brothers are pretty much into body building. I still belong to that sucker. They moved out. I don't know where they're at, but where they're at I still belong to it. I've got papers to prove it. But they folded up.

Jack LaLanne was here at that time and he used to come down there. Even our preacher, he got hooked on that. They got him for a life membership. They were selling everybody a life membership and then they



folded up and moved out. One time I went down there and there was a lock on the door. So that was it.

Dunning: There's really no downtown now, even though they're trying to get developers in there. It hasn't really caught on.

Mays: It just won't work, I think, until they can get rid of that dope thing.

There are problems with that social security building downtown. Those people get their cars broke into. One guy, they stole his battery and he went and bought a new battery. He came back the next day and it was stolen again. They know the cars, so they know which one has got a new battery in it. They know the size they want and they have the cars all marked. They know which one and which part they want. They come out there in white overalls like they're a mechanic and rip you off.

I don't even park there to get on BART. I use BART quite a bit. I can go to the city for ten cents on BART, but I won't park there.

Dunning: In Richmond?

Mays: No. I go either to El Cerrito del Norte or up to the El Cerrito Plaza.

Dunning: Have you ever been broken into at BART?

Mays: No.



Dunning: I used to think the same thing you do, so for a long time I never would park at the Richmond station. But I have been parking there for about six or eight months--knock on wood. You can always get a parking space. That's the advantage.

New Developments in Richmond ##

Dunning: How do you think the new waterfront developments in Richmond are going to go? Brickyard Landing and Marina Bay?

Mays: You know, I was down there recently at the Festival by the Bay. I didn't realize the beautiful facilities they had. People are so stand-offish about that thing that they won't even go look. Now, this was a surprise to me. I have got two boats, and I didn't realize they had the facilities there for launching. I already had my mind made up that Richmond was out. I would rather go to Rodeo or someplace out here to launch. After seeing that though--Man that is fantastic what they have out there. It's beautiful.

If they can sell it to people, that's the thing. If they could have more occasions like they had [Richmond's Festival by the Bay] to get people down there to investigate and see the beautiful facilities, it might make a difference.

Dunning: Well, they're certainly doing a lot of advertising now for the Brickyard Landing. They're calling it the Riviera. There's a lot of radio ads.

Mays: Yes. I think it could be, but you're going to have to get people out of their lethargy to realize that there is something good there, get them out and make them take a look at it. That would be one of the ways, I would say, is to have more functions to get people out.

Dunning: At that Festival by the Bay they were expecting about three or four thousand people and fifteen thousand came, which was significant. It was a positive activity.

Mays: I worked right in that whole area, when I worked on barges as a welder. I repaired barges, big barges. They get a hole in the bottom, a big hole in there the size of a bucket, get a hole knocked underneath the waterline. I would have to go down and fix it.

I was classed as an underwater welder but I didn't wear a suit. We would just pump the chamber out. It would be just one chamber that would be full of water. A barge would come in. We got a lot them from Alaska. I used to look for gold on the ones that came from Alaska. They were gold barges.

That used to be my job, underwater welder without a suit. That was right off from where you guys at the festival were. We used to bring those barges in right there.

### Red Rock

Mays: You know where the Red Rock is, right?

Dunning: Yes. It's near the Richmond-San Rafael bridge and Chevron's Long Wharf.

Mays: Do you know why it's called Red Rock?

Dunning: Because it's red.

Mays: Yes, but years ago, Red Iron Paint, this is where they got their pigment. This was the pigment for Red Iron Paint. It comes from a very good, very fine pigment.

There are seals which live all around this rock. We used to sit and watch the seals from the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge. We used to feed them at noon hours and throw apples to them from the bridge. They would be down there swimming around and we would throw them food.

### Changes in the Ironworkers Profession

Dunning: I have a couple more questions. Do you think there are advancements in the technology that your fellow ironworkers are working with now that have decreased

the accident rate? And do you think technology has affected the job?

Mays: I think it has created a group of people that aren't as proud of their profession, and that try to just get by rather than trying to do their uttermost. I sincerely believe that. I could have went back to work when they were putting this big barge in at the end of 10th Street there. I could have gone back out there at \$15 an hour just sorting bolts. I didn't want to throw my book in. I don't want to make any waves, but that thing was about like the shipyards. It was overmanned.

I think it has deteriorated from what I can see. We were head and shoulders above all other professions. As an ironworker, you were somebody. You could hold your head up high and people really respected you over and above boilermakers and electricians and a lot of them. They might have made more money, but the ironworker was well thought of.

Now I go over there and I see those guys come in there with dirty hats and dirty clothes. And there's a lot of dope on the job now. They make big money. I can't lay my finger on it but I can see it has deteriorated. It isn't what we used to be.

With technology, most of the iron is coming from Japan and Korea now. They ship a lot of the structural iron in. It's being made over there. They do a good job of it. But it's just like those guys building in outer space. There's just so much that you've got to get right in there, and there isn't any



technology that's going to take the place of putting it together.

I don't see any technology in the pipeline field now. They've pretty near priced themselves out of work. They use a lot of plastic. In the ironworkers they still gotta use steel. I don't think they hold their heads up as high as we used to.

Dunning: You have three generations of ironworkers in your family, your father, yourself, and your son. Do you talk about the changes with your son?

Mays: Well, my son is a foreman with a company. He said even at my age I wouldn't have any trouble making it. He said, "You wouldn't have any trouble at all if you wanted to go to work for me. I'll put you to work tomorrow." He said that I could hold my end up as well as the average ironworker does today.

I suppose there's exceptions to every rule. My son now is a good ironworker. He's had his own shop and he's a welder. He's usually in supervisory capacity so I'm proud of him. My brother that's the judge, he used to be for Bechtel Corporation, and he was a foreman for them. We put in some big jobs.

Dunning: Your brother was an ironworker for Bechtel? The one that turned out to be the judge?

Mays: Yes. He moved up north. He never went to college, but he got the judgeship. Up there they vote on the judges, and he won the election. He's retired now.

He gets a pension from his judgeship and from the ironworkers both.

### Closing Remarks

Dunning: Do you have any other recollections of people or events that you would like to add at this point?

Mays: Well, no. If I was to preserve anything I would just praise the Lord for being born when I was. I can remember when they used to come around and buy bottles and rags and bring your ice, and bring your coal with a pair of white mules. There were dirt streets and wood stoves. Here I come, all the way back to a wood stove.

To see the technology. The Model T Ford. I owned one of those. I've owned probably about eight or nine new cars. To see the difference is something. There are all the advances that they've made in television, electronics, and computers. Boy, computers, I can't understand them, but how something could make a thousand corrections in a second or more. It's fantastic how they can do that. I don't know. Of course, I haven't figured out the doorbell yet.

I just had a very, very eventful life. I've hunted, I've fished, I've traveled, I've been around the world. I haven't been to China, but I've been to Norway and I've been to Sicily, Israel, all over. I've been to thirty countries in Europe.

Dunning: You would have seen a lot.

Mays: I've seen a lot of them. I know I was getting the pictures out the other day and they got all mixed up. I was telling somebody, "You can't tell a waterfall in Switzerland and Austria apart." And houses. I wish I had marked them all, but I didn't. If my wife was here she would know what the pictures were.

Traveling is one thing my wife and I did do when we had our health. We went four times to Hawaii. We went to Israel, we went to Europe, we went to Canada. I've been to Mexico, Cancun, three or four times.

That's one thing I would advise anybody. If you've got your health, go. Go, don't save it.

I have an uncle, he used to save fifty cents off of the bread truck. That was sixty years ago. He saved fifty cents a day. What's that fifty cents a day worth now? He could have taken that fifty cents and bought a ticket to some place at that time.

If you've got your health, go. I had one uncle that advised me that. If you've got a loved one just stick with her and go as much as you can. Everybody, every time they saw me they would ask me, "Where have you been?" This was after we had our kids raised.

We didn't have it that good. I've seen the time when we couldn't pay our bills. We had to scrimp. We didn't eat too high on the beef. But we always managed. We never did go hungry. I had a real good

provider. She's gone, but I still see her hand. She took care of me. I didn't know until she was gone that I had nine bank accounts. How do you like that? How would you like to find that out?

Dunning: Do you have any special ambitions now?

Mays: I'm going to go on a voyage on a ship this next summer. I don't know if I'll go around the world or what I'll do. That's one thing. I'm going to go alone, I guess.

Dunning: Well, I think with your personality you'll meet a lot of people.

Mays: I don't have too much trouble meeting people except when the chips are down. If I have to force it then I don't do too good, but if I don't have to force it--But I think I would do all right on a senior citizen's round-the-world cruise. I might as well spend some of it. No use in leaving it all to the kids. They're going to get plenty anyway. If I was to die in my sleep they would be loaded. Especially with hats.

I know what they'll do. They'll back a dumpster out here and just start throwing. I got two buildings, a full attic, and then I got a big carport full out there, and then a garage loaded. I got more junk I keep buying and don't ever get rid of.

[end of interview]



Judith K. Dunning

Interviewer/Editor Regional Oral History Office since 1982.  
Specialty in community and labor history.  
Project Director, "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of  
Richmond, California."

Previous oral history projects: Three Generations of Italian  
Women in Boston's North End; World War I and II shipyard workers  
at the Charlestown Navy Yard, Boston; and Textile mill workers in  
Lowell, Massachusetts.

Photography exhibitions: "Lowell: A Community of Workers,"  
Lowell, MA 1981-1984 (travelling).  
Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers"  
Richmond Museum, 1988.

Play: "Boomtown" based on the oral histories of shipyard  
workers, produced by San Francisco Tale Spinners Theater, 1989.

Member Richmond Arts Commission, 1988-1990.

Currently adapting Richmond community oral histories into large  
print books for California adult literacy programs.











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